Gender Performativity Seen Through the Eyes of Children: a drag queen mediates literary encounters

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ABSTRACT – Gender Performativity Seen Through the Eyes of Children: a drag queen mediates literary encounters – In this article we examine ways in which gender performativity may be recognized by young children, looking at a drag queen's mediation of literary encounters. The theoretical-analytical framework we employ comes from Gender Studies and Cultural Studies of post-structuralist inspiration. Our text recounts experiences from readings, conversation circles and play activities we organized in a small city in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Analyzing children's play and interactions, we observe that from an early age they begin to recognize and question certain expectations about bodies. Contact with art, through literature and other modes of gender performance, can contribute to this reflexive process.
Keywords: **Performativity. Childhood. Gender Scripts. Drag Queen.**

RÉSUMÉ – La Performativité de Genre aux Yeux des Enfants: une drag queen comme médiatrice de la lecture littéraire – Dans cet article, nous étudions comment la performativité de genre est reconnue par les jeunes enfants à travers la médiation de la lecture littéraire par une drag queen, ayant comme base théorique et analytique les études de genre et les études culturelles d'inspiration post-structuraliste. Nous organisons des rencontres avec des lectures de livres, des cercles de conversation et des activités ludiques dans une bibliothèque à l'intérieur du Rio Grande do Sul. En analysant les scènes réalisées par les enfants, nous observons que dès leur plus jeune âge, ils apprennent à (re) connaître et à tendre certaines attentes sur les corps. Le contact avec l'art, à travers la littérature et d'autres modèles performatifs de genre, peut contribuer au processus de réflexion.
Mots-clés: **Performativité. Enfance. Scripts de Genre. Drag Queen.**

RESUMO – Performatividade de Gênero no Olhar das Crianças: uma *drag queen* como mediadora de leitura literária – Neste artigo investigamos como a performatividade de gênero é reconhecida por crianças pequenas a partir da mediação de leitura literária por uma *drag queen,* tendo como base teórico-analítica os Estudos de Gênero e Culturais de inspiração pós-estruturalista. Organizamos encontros com leituras de livros, rodas de conversa e atividades lúdicas, em uma biblioteca no interior do Rio Grande do Sul. Analisando cenas protagonizadas pelas crianças, observamos que desde cedo elas aprendem a (re)conhecer, (re)produzir e a tensionar certas expectativas sobre os corpos. O contato com a arte, por meio da literatura e de outros modelos performativos de gênero, pode contribuir no processo de reflexão.
Palavras-chave: **Performatividade. Infâncias. *Scripts* de Gênero. *Drag Queen.***

Performing some Introductory Notes

Research on children and childhood have gained greater visibility over the last few decades, a recognition of the value of the original and unique perspectives on the world around them that characterize human beings in this early stage of life (Felipe, 2009; Campos-Ramos; Barbato, 2014). More recently, considerable theoretical work on childhood has argued that this stage in the life cycle should not be conceived from a universal framework, but as produced through numerous and complex intersections (historical, social, cultural).

The efforts made by a series of scholars in naming and critically examining childhood, have been important to us. Among them, we give particular salience to the works of Mariano Narodowski (1998), who discusses childhood in times of hyper-reality, Sandra Corazza (1998), who in her doctoral thesis elaborates the concept of *ninja childhood*, and Mariangela Momo (2007), who develops ideas on the phenomenon of *consumerist childhood* in her thesis intitled *Mídia e consumo na produção de uma infância pós-moderna que vai à escola* [Media and consumption in the production of a post-modern childhood that goes to school]. Nonetheless, these concepts – unstable, partial, and reflecting particular moments – do not exhaust the complexity of contemporary childhoods.

Given the specificities of the age group we refer to, it is important to keep in mind that research on/about young children constitutes a singular challenge. In taking the challenge head on, researchers who intend to observe the very young should include not only spontaneous observation but also planned activities such as conversation groups, which can include diverse cultural artifacts – toys, films, books, etc. – and can function as catalysts of broader interaction (Felipe, 2009). We also emphasize that there is no way to foresee results and that the discussions that this type of research situation propitiate tend to surpass hypotheses elaborated *a priori*; participating subjects possess knowledge and ways of seeing the world around them that are fascinatingly singular.

Embracing Judith Butler's (2017) concept of gender performativity as the basis of our notions of femininity and masculinity are constructed, we explore how gender is understood and implemented within a particular

group of children between the ages of four and six. We then go on to ask whether children can be considered *performative* from the time they are born – for example, whether crying can be considered a *performative act*, or how family performativity is analysed and understood within infancy.

Beginning from these initial questions, our research sought to understand how young children, pupils of Early Childhood Education, recognized and understood gender performance through literary encounters mediated by a drag queen. It is important to note that performativity that we work with here refers specifically to intentional gender performance. The figure of *drag* that is pertinent here clearly situates gender as an historical, cultural, linguistic and social construction and demonstrates that we are captives of the norms that construct us as *masculine* or *feminine* (Louro, 2016; Butler, 2017).

Our research employs the concept of gender scripts (Felipe, 2016; 2019), understood as norms, prescriptions and scripts that circulate through a variety of discourses (juridical, medical, mediatic, religious, pedagogical, psychological, political, etc.) and institutions (schools, families, hospitals, churches, etc.). These scripts, both proposed and imposed by particular cultures and historical moments, belong to a context of social transformations and intersections – class, educational level, urban or rural residence, religion – that reinforce the constitution of our gender identities (Rosa, Cristiano, 2019).

These scripts not only foment the construction of allegedly fixed and hegemonic femininities and masculinities, but also of gender performativities. That is, with the establishment of gender scripts, it also becomes possible to intentionally or unintentionally enact other identities, ones which correspond to expectations that arise in other situations. As we will explain in greater detail further on, we organized three different mediated literary encounters in a public library in a small city in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The stories were recounted by a drag character put together by a man who an Early Childhood educator and has vast experience in working with young children[1].

After the stories were told, we proposed a conversation circle to the children, beginning with a few triggering questions as well as play activities, based on Brazilian and international literature that problematize, in addi-

tion to gender, issues of class, race and sexuality. The books we worked with were *Flicts* (Ziraldo, 2012), *Tudo bem ser diferente* [It's Okay to be Different] (Parr, 2009), *Monstro Rosa* [Pink Monster] (Dios, 2016), *Todos zoam todos* [People Make Fun of Eachother] (Dipacho, 2016), *Uma história apaixonada* [A Passionate Story] (Cassol, 2009) and *Meu amigo Jim* [Jack and Jim] (Crowther, 2007).

In selecting the material for our mediated reading, we followed some of Cristina Rosa's (2019) criteria, according to which children's literature must have not only aesthetic qualities but also fulfil a series of other requisites. Among them are the ability to instigate reflection and imagination, writers' use of metaphorical language and the possibility that stories may endure the passage of time.

It is important to consider here that literature is one of the most significant of arts, and one through which many other artistic possibilities can be generated – in conjunction with film, theater and music (such as the many poems that are put to music, and the many literary works that are adapted for cinema). As Graça Paulino (2014, p. 177) states, "[...] reading is literary when the reader's action becomes a cultural practice that is artistic in nature, establishing a pleasureful interaction with the text that is read".

For our purposes here, we have chosen to focus on four particular scenes from our encounters which bring out issues of gender performativity, captured through the eyes of the girls and boys who took part in our circles. It is important to emphasize that our problematizations would not have been possible without the literary mediation of each event, conducted by a figure *in drag* who awakened a mixture of curiosity, enchantment and reflection amidst our young audience.

A Drag Queen Telling Stories to Children?

The idea of a drag queen reading children's literature, at the core of our methodology, was inspired by a program from the United States, *Drag Queen Story Hour*, founded in December of 2015 by writer Michelle Tea. It was held for the first time in libraries and bookstores in the city of San Francisco, and later spread to other cities, such as New York, Los Angeles and North New Jersey. During the event, local drags read stories to children who were there with their families, all organized around the principle

of respect for difference. In addition to entertainment, activities of this sort generate reflections around issues of human rights.

It is interesting to observe the extent to which the figure of drag queen has moved beyond shows and night club performances, migrating into the realms of literature, theatre, cinema, publicity, soap operas, reality shows, television programs, YouTube, bachelor parties, universities and research groups, among others (Rosa, Cristiano, 2019). This spreading has taken place due to the vibrant activism that has unfolded within the LGBTQI+ movement – Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, *Travestis* and Transexuals, Queer and Intersex –, although for a very long time drag queen performance was misunderstood and taken as nothing but an exaggeration of all that could seem feminine. But for whom would it represent exaggeration? Doesn't everyone, to some extent, *perform*?

Citing Guacira Lopes Louro (2016, p. 87-88):

> D*rag* explicitly assumes that one 'fabricates' one's own body – intervening on, hiding within, adding onto, revealing. All of these acts are deliberate, rather than representing an attempt to 'pass' as a woman. The purpose is not to be confounded with or taken as a woman. Drag is an intentional exaggeration of that which is conventionally taken as the feminine, accentuating bodily markers, attitudes and attire that are culturally identified with the former. Thus it can be understood as gender parody, imitation and exaggeration, moving closer, legitimating and, at the same time, subverting the subject that is 'copied'.

The author further points to the drag queen as "[...] repeating and subverting the feminine, using and emphasizing the cultural codes that mark that gender [...]" and for that reason, this figure "[...] enables us to think about gender and sexuality, enables us to question the essence and authenticity of these dimensions and reflect upon their constructed nature" (Louro, 2016, p. 89).

Judith Butler (2017, p. 237) raises the issue as to how much the construction of bodies is impregnated with the idea of performance, since subjects are socialized to manifest, to a greater or lesser extent, their gender identities and respective sexual orientations. According to Butler, when drags imitate (in particular) the feminine gender, they reveal that gender itself is an imitation, since:

> The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance.

It is important to consider how much classical theatre is directly linked to the origin of the *drag queen*, as in times gone by, women were not allowed to become actresses and thus, men were obliged to play female characters. As Cristiano Rosa (2019) points out, the term drag evolved from an acronym – a lexical unit formed from the combination of the initial letters of the words that make up an expression or phrase. In this case, the term comes from the expression *Dressed Resembling a Girl* that was found in a footnote from one of William Shakespeare's scripts, at the end of the 16th century, in reference to characters and their modes of dress.

Another element that is important to our understanding of the meaning of this art is the difference between the terms *drag queen* and to be *in drag.* The former refers to a man who dresses up as a woman, thus creating a performative illusion through the adoption of exaggerated feminine attributes. The latter term, in turn, refers to a mise-en-scene by actors, and usually comedians, who play female characters, but should not be confused with *drag queens*[2]. According to Hunty and Monteiro (Filme de Drag (?)..., 2019), to be *in drag* means to put together a character who possesses historical baggage of his/her own, while the construction of the *drag queen* is carried out according to particular forms of knowledge and *readings* of the world, that is, subjects who take on the role, investing it with their own life experience. According to Cristiano Rosa (2019), a *drag queen* gets into drag through actions that are centred around dressing up and undressing, slipping from one gender to another. These acts bring out the very possibility of constructing/deconstructing one's own masculinity, while reconstructing an artificial and generally exaggerated femininity. Obviously, such transformations and passages can also be experimented with by women, as drag refers to a persona.

As Chidiac and Oltramari (2004) point out, the construction of the subject *drag queen* is carried out starting from particular psychological and physical characteristics of a person, and are composed through gesture, tone of voice, way of walking, etc. Another crucial aspect of getting into drag is adopting a name, usually an imposing and attention-getting one that matches this caricaturized composition of the feminine. Butler (2019, p. 381-382) draws attention to the fact that getting into drag is performative, while adding that "[...] if drag is performative, that does not mean that all performativity is to be understood as drag".

The art of drag thus has the potential to bring together different segments of the performing arts through a singular figure, since the subject who is produced through *doing drag*, the drag queen, is often, at the same time, actor, dancer, choreographer, director, costume designer, hair stylist and scriptwriter, among others (Rosa, Cristiano, 2019). Nonetheless, it would be rash to conceptualize any person who decides to don a wig and do some sort of performance as art/artist.

Performance, as a concept, may be characterized by the countless, non-rationalized performances that dictate gender – and which, although not constituted as acts that are practiced freely and spontaneously, are regulated "[...] by a rigid social structure of language that sustains and prevents other possible ways of acting" (Silva, 2018, p. 24-25). Performativity, on the other hand, can be understood, specifically, as an intentional way of performing gender which corresponds to challenging its conventional performance and revealing its fragility, and thus, constitutes an action that has political relevance.

In this sense, we are able to argue that the performativity exercised by the *drag queen* is revealing of how gender identities are constructed through a whole social, historical and cultural context, in such a way that people are co-opted by their discourses. In Elsa Dorlin's words, (2009, p. 102), "[...] what a Drag Queen performs is exuberance and subversion, the exact equivalent to what we do, very single day, when we act as 'normal' men or women". At the same time, we should keep in mind that *drag* is unable to dismantle binaries and conventions – but does perhaps contribute relevant questions that act to denaturalize that which is taken for granted, as Cristiano Rosa's research indicates (2019).

Performativities in Action: between fantasy and shame

Reading circles mediated by a drag queen marked a departure from the traditional story-telling hour, and children's reactions were very visible. On our first encounter, it became clear that the children who were taking part in our research were instigated by the mediator, not only as storyteller but because of her persona. The first scene that we highlight and reflect upon here took place as soon as the reading of two books chosen for our first encounter finished (Image 1). At that moment, our drag mediator left the room and we began our chat with the children, asking them to express opinions on the stories they had just heard and person who read them:

> Researchers: Did you like the stories?
> Children: Yes!!!
> Researchers: And what about the person who read the stories?
> Marina: She was wearing a disguise, right?
> Cecília: The person who read the stories was a man dressed like a woman!
> Marina: He didn't have to feel ashamed.
> Researchers: What do you mean, Marina?
> Marina: He didn't have to wear a disguise to tell stories!
> (Report from our First Encounter, June 1st, 2019).

We certainly had no intention of fooling the children in any way regarding the identity of the teacher who read the stories to them, but meant to work with the figure of the drag as art and as an initial element that would function as a trigger to collect empirical data. And this was just what happened, with the participants picking up on the performed identity of the mediator, which led, in turn, to some reflections.

The two girls in the dialogue we have reproduced above expressed in a very open manner their perceptions of the constructed identity of the person who read the stories; Marina, in particular, referred to the use of costume. In our interpretation, the child saw the mediator as a man who felt shy or ashamed about reading stories out loud to the group, *disguising himself* as a woman in order to do so. Thus, the notion of performativity is evoked. This notion, as discussed by Judith Butler (2017, p. 235), makes reference to the construction of body and gender:

> In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the

play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.

The above-cited conversation led us to believe that some young children understand early on that gender involves performativity, as here they were capable of indicating drag as a sort of *feminine disguise* used by a male subject. In this particular context, in Marina's mind, this *getting in drag* could be justified by shyness or even the *inadequateness* of a man as reading mediator, given that this type of activity is usually associated with women.

In Marina's view, the storyteller felt the need to disguise himself. This perception evokes reflections on the act or process of *passing as another gender* (Duque, 2019). Yet in the eyes of this young child, it suggests a performativity that is linked to the interruption of gender scripts: in saying that the mediator had no need for disguise, she expresses her point of view that storytelling is an activity for men as well as women.

Image 1 – *Drag Queen* reading the book *Tudo bem ser diferente* [It's okay to be different] at our first Encounter.
Source: Photo by Dário Gonçalves (June 1st, 2019).

These observations lead us to the issue of the low number of male teachers working in Early Childhood Education. According to the 2017 School Survey (Brasil, 2018), a mere 3,4% of the professionals working in

the sector are male. It is worth commenting here that, at the beginning of our first encounter, when the drag storyteller asked the children who usually read to them, only one boy mentioned being read to by his father. Generally speaking, the greater responsibility for tasks related to caring and educating children falls to women, and the fact that it was mothers who brought their children to our encounters is consistent with these patterns.

Returning once again to Marina and Cecilia's comments, we wonder whether the same queries would have emerged if our mediator had, rather than going drag, been dressed as a witch, a fairy or a princess.

> And if it had been a man dressed as a clown? Would the child's understandings regarding disguise or farce have been the same? Would she have made the observation that the person behind the costume had no reason to be ashamed of his actions? We could ask ourselves a similar question as to whether, rather than a *drag* (*queen*), a *drag* (*king*) or *travesti* had been doing the mediating. What speech would this have brought out in the children? (Rosa, Cristiano, 2019, p. 107).

Another reflection that our research poses is the relationship between getting in drag and the clown arts. According to Ana Carolina Muller Fuchs (2018, p. 43), "[...] 'women in clown arts' is an arena that emerges from issues of gender relations as social struggles for places in which to work, to gain recognition and to develop an aesthetics that mark out its particular aesthetic form". The author argues that there is a "[...] practice of parody in women's clown arts that can be understood as gender-performing acts which reverberate through modes of subjectification and can be extended to other social categories" (Fuchs, 2018, p. 43).

We are also reminded here of the character called *Grandmother Mafalda*, who in the 1980s and 1990s hosted television shows for children and was played by the comedian, singer and Brazilian television producer, Valentino Guzzo. His character was a mixture of elements that included drag art and clowning meant as entertainment for children. It was many years before the television audience even discovered that the real person behind the character was a man.

Performative Experiments: using red lipstick

After the end of our first literary encounter, another particular occurrence that was brought to our attention further demonstrated children's ability to capture the existence of gender performativities, and how they are able to take part in them, guided by their own creativity and inventiveness.

> *After our encounter, the aunt of one of the children [who had taken part in it] sent us a message via WhatsApp, mentioning that after leaving the event they had gone to the her mother's house where her nephew, José Paulo, was left alone for a short time in his grandmother's room. When his mother found him there, she saw that he was putting on some bright red lipstick. When his sister asked what he was doing, his answer was that he wanted to see what it would be like to look like the person who had read them stories.*
> (Report from First Encounter, June 1st, 2019).

This second situation illustrates how much João Paulo, in his simple way, was able to recognize the artifices used by the reading mediator – make up, clothing, hair style/wig – to put together an identity. The boy, using lipstick to see what he might look like if he tried some elements of drag, demonstrated the possibilities of having (or allowing oneself to have) new performative experiences, beyond gender impositions.

Numerous authors have discussed the diverse types of violence that are commonly directed against children regarding the construction of gender and sexual identities, particularly in relation to boys, as research by Bello (2006), Felipe and Guizzo (2013), Caetano and Silva Junior (2018) and Leguiça (2019) shows. This reveals an interesting contradiction: while children are depicted as creative and curious, they are also constantly subjected to social interdictions that express social and cultural norms. Children's experiences with gender performance are encumbered by a socially-restricted roster of identities.

In the situation described above, we believe that the child's interest in experimentation was made possible by two facts: firstly, the contact that he had with drag art, and secondly, because his family environment was one of understanding and support in light of his curiosity, showing no concern over his use of red lipstick. The only concern that was expressed had to do with the *damages* caused his mischief, since his father then had to buy a new lipstick for the boy's grandmother.

We imagine that the reaction that adults would have had regarding the boy's use of red lipstick would have been different had it occurred in a

school environment, since a large part of the staff that works in Early Childhood Education does not know how to deal well with particular situations which test the limits of gender scripts. In relation to a similar incident, Jane Felipe and Bianca Salazar Guizzo (2013, p. 34) point out that "[...] teachers often become 'gatekeepers' of children's sexual orientations [...]", and that "[...] there is severe vigilance over boys' masculinity, seen as securing appropriate adult masculinity outcomes, while there do not appear to be analogous concerns regarding little girls".

Furthermore, it is important to point out that José Paulo's act, putting on lipstick far from the eyes of others and not at someone else's behest, transgressed some of the gender scripts that have been constructed around boys' masculinity, and can thus be seen as a possible subversion of prescriptions regarding what the child would have been allowed or encouraged to do. It is our conviction that children begin to create their own strategies to demonstrate their intentions, in relation to their perceptions of adult performativities. We find Marina Marcondes Machado's (2010, p. 123) concept of *child performer* useful here,

> [...] children are performers in their own daily lives. Their actions say something about themselves, their parents, the culture around them, as well as about what is to come – and if we use this as an interpretive tool, we can go on to assume that they exercise responsibility and independence in the early years of their being in the world. They have their own way of adjusting or not adjusting to pre-established patterns of conduct, their own acquired behaviour and initial frames of reference, all of which can provide us with clues regarding what have been referred to as 'childhood cultures'.

Following these guidelines, it becomes interesting to observe how, from very early on, children elaborate strategies to get around the impositions of their environment – family, school, friends –, experimenting with and exercising some degree of performativity, given their ability to (re)invent themselves as protagonists of their own lives and in terms of their relations with others (Zanette, 2016).

But she was Different: identities and differences in childhood

At each one of our literary encounters, the drag mediator adopted a different style, stirring up commentary amongst the children. Performativi-

ty was directly related to concepts of identity and difference (Silva, 2014), as expressed in two situations that took place at the beginning of our second meeting.

For our second encounter, the idea was that the drag mediator would welcome the children and their families together with the research coordinator, but since application of make-up required more time, the mediator's appearance was delayed (Image 2). When the drag character did appear, one of the children exclaimed that *she was different*. A boy, seeing the figure approaching, placed his hands over his eyes and then, little by little, peeled them away, a smile spreading over his face.

These reactions on the part of the children demonstrate a simultaneous admiration and awe at the new look that the drag character had, at this second encounter. Thus, we can reflect upon what *being different* meant here for this child. The girl's astonishment, expressed out loud, did not stop her from participating and interacting in the activities that unfolded over the course of the reading, thus indicating that the noted *difference* did not, in fact, make a difference.

Image 2 – *Drag Queen* reading the book *Monstro Rosa* a tour second encounter.
Source: Photo by Dário Gonçalves (June 15, 2019).

We might also want to ask, in relation to the situation described above, if Cecilia herself was the *same girl* every day, if she did not change clothing and hair style. What is expressed in the spontaneous manifestation of a child's perceptions leads us to reflection upon children's reactions to bodies that are considered abject, as well as how they see difference. Yet it is

important to keep in mind that body cannot be reduced to our discourse on it, for as Butler states (2004, p. 198-199),

> There is always a dimension of bodily life that cannot be fully represented, even as it works as the condition and activating condition of language. [...] We say something, and mean something by what we say, but we also do something with our speech, and what we do, how we act upon another with our language, is not the same as the meaning we consciously convey. It is in this sense that the significations of the body exceed the intentions of the subject.

In this regard, we understand that a drag body may be seen as an abject body, insofar as not legitimated as a *true* body, but constitutes one that escapes established social norms on gender scripts and for that reason is not deemed worthy of attention and respect. This very body can become desirable when it comes to artistic expression, although caution should be taken in asserting that the drag character influenced the children who took part in our research enough to affect their own relationship to femininity and masculinity. Perhaps what we can safely claim is that it brought them a moment of reflection regarding the numerous possibilities that exist for experimenting, inventing and investing in bodies and their aesthetic expression, regardless of gender.

We understand gender performativity as something that goes beyond identities, intermingling with the differences that reverberate through attempts to express what one is and/or what others expect us to be(come). This suggests that all possible experimentations with our bodies put socially established patterns that predetermine our choices in check.

I Knew it!: hunches, hypotheses and motives

As it became habitual for some of the children when our encounters ended, after our second Saturday of reading had finished, some of them scampered off to play in a little square next to the library. Members of the research team then began to reorganize the space that had been used during the meeting, and the drag went to another room to undress. One of the children, Pedro, had to go to the bathroom and ended up right next to the place the drag character was using to take off wig and make-up. When he

saw the teacher without the wig on, Pedro exclaimed in a loud voice: – *I knew it!!* He then ran off, chuckling to himself at his discovery.

The child's exclamation suggests an existing suspicion regarding the *real* identity of the mediator, as well as an understanding of the process getting in drag. Seeing his hunch that behind the feminine make-up, attire and long-haired wig of the person was a man, Pedro was able to identify the act of getting in drag. Yet this made no difference in terms of the activities that had already occurred at the library.

The fact that the little boy referred to his hunch that the mediator was, in fact, representing someone else, exemplifies a child's consciousness of performativity. His understanding of drag revealed through the episode of his witnessing the *undressing* testifies to how children are able to perceive other modes of self-expression. Although we are all equal in many ways, we are also singular in our ways of expressing ourselves.

Image 3 – *Drag Queen* character reading the book *Uma história apaixonada* at our third encounter.
Source: Photo by Dário Gonçalves (July 20, 2019).

Thus, it becomes possible to perceive how much children of this age group already understand particular crossings in the terrain of gender identities, capable of distinguishing situations that involve performativity. In other words, they are able to perceive how much individuals are fulfilling scripts that have been socially directed toward them (that which is expected of a man or a woman in terms of appearance, way of being or acting) or when those same individuals are (re)creating, breaking with or using their *original* identity playfully in carrying out particular activities.

This leads us to recognize how much children are able to perceive such performative practices not only within their families, but also in school settings. While many teachers try to control their pupils' bodies, investing in performances aligned with hegemonic gender scripts, children are endowed with the ability to observe, analyse and formulate hypotheses through which they present and discuss their opinions and world views. Although in some ways we may consider them fragile, children are reflexive and for this reason are also robust and ready for transformations (Barbosa, 2014).

A curious interest in drag representation (Image 3) led the children in our study to attempt to figure things out with their own eyes and in doing so, raise some possible justifications for going into drag. In this sense, we reiterate the significance of reflections on how children produce certain abilities with which they investigate the world around them, using their lived experience as a kind of baggage to be explored, in an attempt to understand a variety of situations, far from the jaundiced gaze that so often plagues adult outlooks (Rosa, Cristiano, 2019).

On Performativities Learned, Perceived and (Re)Produced in Childhoods

In this article, we have approached gender performativity as a concept that interpellates us from early childhood. Furthermore, children themselves recognize and are capable of analysing it. The human challenge of being protagonists of our own life narratives is with us from our early years, alongside other voices that reverberate throughout society and situate us in main or supporting roles within the stories we become a part of.

The opportunity to work on this research with a drag character acting as literary mediator has revealed how small children already have an understanding of gender performativity. This was demonstrated by the way they perceived the teacher's getting into drag, interpreted as a costume or disguise, as intentional rather than natural. Furthermore, this experience, which gave them direct contact with drag art, awoke in them new curiosity regarding the construction of identity, leading to reflexive moments regarding the shaping of their own formative identifications.

Some further questions may be asked, following queries proposed by Cristiano Rosa (2019), as follows: if children already understand performa-

tivity, why continue to invest in an education that promotes segregation through a binary opposition between girls and boys? What are the reasons that lead us to presuppose that particular behaviours should be imposed according to gender, through a heteronormative view that circumscribes performances and promotes fixed notions of the feminine and the masculine. Should we not always encourage practices of negotiation and subversion of gender scripts? What types of inequalities and disadvantages are we producing?

The concept of gender scripts we used in this research worked as an important theoretical and conceptual tool enabling us to analyse performativities according to the expectations that are generated concerning them. Thus, both the performance of the drag character as literary mediator and the narratives of children during and after our conversation circle meetings serve to demonstrate how norms make themselves present in the constitution of our identities and how, consequently, they take hold of us.

Furthermore, the gender scripts that the drag queen mobilized led the children to questioning their own identities (after all, was it really a man dressed as a woman in order to tell stories?), enabling us to reflect on the issue of difference – how it is constituted, as well as other specificities that involve gender performativity. In their own way, children learn, perceive and reproduce these social expectations; in spaces that are safer and more democratic, where there is more openness and an eagerness to hear what it is they have to say, they express their points of view and surprise us with their ways of seeing the world and those who inhabit it.

We thus come to reiterate not the need to *give voice* to children – in fact, this refers to an ability they already possess, and one that they use, alongside other communicative skills. It is a matter of learning to listen to children, observe them and learn with them, encouraging their protagonism and showing how it can make a difference, creating new paths in their, and our, understanding of the complexity of the world and of relationships. We believe that in the gaze of boys and girls, to *be* a woman or a man, as expressed through complex performativities, are constructions that can be mobilized in playful ways, undoing and recreating them. In this light, it is important to create spaces where children can truly take advantage of the potentialities of childhood, growing and experimenting, in pleasurable and

creative ways, with practices that negotiate and subvert norms that have trapped and regulated them since the early days of their lives.

Notes

[1] The teacher referred to here worked as a volunteer for the project, and took part in three training sessions prior to his activities in this research: one on literature for children and adults and story telling, another on literary mediation and a third on reading out loud. Nine children took part in our encounters – three boys and six girls – (signing a consent form) as well as members for their families, who also signed the appropriate form granting free and informed consent. Our meetings were held in June and July of 2019. The childrens' real names have been withheld here, substituted by pseudonyms that pay tribute to writers of children's literature. The methodology that we employed to invite people to participate was based on existing networks of acquaintances. We invited several families whom we already knew and made the decision not to put a wide or public call on our initiative, given recent persecution of schools and teachers. The current wave of political conservatism that has spread throughout the country, especially since 2015 when all mention to gender and sexuality was removed from the nationwide educational curriculum (Plano Nacional de Educação) made this precaution necessary. The above-mentioned conservative movement has been spearheaded by members of parliament and religious leaders, who have positioned themselves against *gender ideology*; their activities created a ripple effect, and soon several Brazilian cities and states had also excluded the words gender and sexuality from their municipal and state education plans, severely restricting the possibilities of sex education in the school context (Junqueira, 2017; Miskolci; Campana, 2017).

[2] Several nationally renown male comedians played female characters: Chico Anysio's *Salomé*, Jô Soares' *Vovó Naná*, Tom Cavalcante's *Jarilene* and Paulo Gustavo's *Dona Hermínia*.

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