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A Posthumanist Pragmatism: Rereading Tomboys

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Abstract

Gender has often dictated the roles and responsibilities that individuals are expected to fulfill. Societies in general still adhere to a strict gender binary system, and have largely been either intolerant of or, at minimum, uncomfortable with those who break from such a system. The tomboy figure has been the recipient of societal judgement for what has been interpreted to be a subversion of and deviance from traditional gender norms, and this has played out in a variety of ways. For instance, literary depictions of the tomboy—as the manifestations of the dominant cultural attitude—have captured both the aversion to as well as an evolving disposition toward non-feminine female characters. To trace and evaluate this trajectory, we utilize a framework provided by posthumanist theory, in conjunction with the pragmatic method. Important strains contained within posthumanism and pragmatism reject philosophical assumptions that there exists a single, true ontology, while promoting this-worldly notions concerning inclusion and diversity. By demonstrating how the tomboy has challenged presumptive ways of thinking, and continues to dispel preconceived notions and cultural expectations, we seek to show that the tomboy identity and disposition are to be celebrated for their authenticity and nonconformance, particularly as border-blurring and boundary-reducing, rather than deviating from or, for that matter, mirroring some purported true humanity. To accept such—that is, to hold any figure, tomboy or otherwise, as paradigmatic—would amount to a metaphysical endorsement for the knowability of a one and accurate experience, human or, even, otherwise. Alternatively, for us, the tomboy can serve as a valid model for how to undermine and help dismantle patriarchal and other prejudicial ideologies. Last, we attempt to show the increasing obsolescence of foundationalism as well as to ultimately offer the tomboy figure as a champion for continual self-enlargement, within a larger, posthumanist pragmatic process of self-creation.

Keywords

Borders, Boundaries, Education, Gender, Literature, Posthumanism, Postmodernism, Pragmatism, Tomboy

A Posthumanist Pragmatism: Rereading Tomboys

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Abstract:

Gender has often dictated the roles and responsibilities that individuals are expected to fulfill. Societies in general still adhere to a strict gender binary system, and have largely been either intolerant of or, at minimum, uncomfortable with those who break from such a system. The tomboy figure has been the recipient of societal judgement for what has been interpreted to be a subversion of and deviance from traditional gender norms, and this has played out in a variety of ways. For instance, literary depictions of the tomboy—as the manifestations of the dominant cultural attitude—have captured both the aversion to as well as an evolving disposition toward non-feminine female characters. To trace and evaluate this trajectory, we utilize a framework provided by posthumanist theory, in conjunction with the pragmatic method. Important strains contained within posthumanism and pragmatism reject philosophical assumptions that there exists a single, true ontology, while promoting this-worldly notions concerning inclusion and diversity. By demonstrating how the tomboy has challenged presumptive ways of thinking, and continues to dispel preconceived notions and cultural expectations, we seek to show that the tomboy identity and disposition are to be celebrated for their authenticity and nonconformance, particularly as border-blurring and boundary-reducing, rather than deviating from or, for that matter, mirroring some purported *true* humanity. To accept such—that is, to hold any figure, tomboy or otherwise, as paradigmatic—would amount to a metaphysical endorsement for the knowability of a one and accurate experience, human or, even, otherwise. Alternatively, for us, the tomboy can serve as a valid model for how to undermine and help dismantle patriarchal and other prejudicial ideologies. Last, we attempt to show the increasing obsolescence of foundationalism as well as to ultimately offer the tomboy figure as a champion for continual self-enlargement, within a larger, posthumanist pragmatic process of self-creation.

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1. Introduction:

The tomboy figure, as portrayed through popular culture such as literature, television, and film, has evolved throughout the years, the process of which, however, has largely been examined through foundational lenses. This has made for a gendered system where there are two distinct identities—male and female—each with a necessarily assigned social role that individuals are compelled, if not coerced, to endorse and embody. We propose the use of a pragmatic posthumanist perspective to view and analyze the tomboy, as this method allows for getting rid of this gender binary. In particular, we draw on overlapping features from posthumanism, postmodernism, and pragmatism—specifically, their denial of individuals possessing inherent qualities that provide philosophical justifications for categorizing them, or any type, as fundamentally different, superior, inferior, or otherwise. To that end, we delve into the conventions that literature authors have often adhered to when constructing the tomboy figure in works of fiction. We then trace how certain cultural norms, specifically building restrictive boundaries—both literally and figuratively—have worked to prevent women from more fully expressing varying types of selves, one being personality. We do this in the context of analyzing how educational systems encourage, or discourage, particular identity formations. We conclude the chapter with a critique of non-posthumanist ideologies, as they are applied to the tomboy in order to present an alternative and, in our view, improved orientation toward attempting to understand the tomboy as well as others who have continually sought to defy, with increasing success, an outmoded traditionalism in favor of creating new ways to conceive of individuality and identity.

2. Postmodernism, posthumanism, and pragmatism:

Postmodernism is difficult to define. The term has been “used to mean so many different things” that it has almost lost all its meaning, resulting in a “perceived loss of unity” (Rorty, 1998, p. 262). This loss originated from the postmodern rejection of the belief that reality and truth are synonymous and “that there is One True Account of How Things Really Are” (Rorty, 1998, p. 262). Postmodernists oppose the ideas of “foundationalism, essentialism, traditionalism, unmediated claims to truth, and historical and social totalizing” (Lavine, 1993, p. 112). This opposition allows postmodern philosophy to be “ubiquitous and cross-cultural” (Lavine, 1993, p. 112). These ideas have not just defined postmodernists but confined them because of their dismissal of modes of thought that involve “universalizing,

prioritizing, [and] totalizing” (Lavine, 1993, pp. 111-112). Postmodernism allows us to expand our understanding of the world by dismissing “the modernist presumption of a single objective world” (Lavine, 1993, pp. 111-112) and enables us to recognize “a plurality of worlds, of realities, and a plurality of legitimate modes of interaction with it” (Ryder, 1993, p. 98). The acknowledgement of pluralism has opened the door for us to understand the “activit[ies], insights and ideas of whole groups traditionally marginalized” (Ryder, 1993, p. 98).

Posthumanism evolved from postmodernism by drawing on “the postmodern critique of objective knowledge and absolute truth” and rejecting the idea of essentialism (Ferrando, 2012, p. 11) and by expanding on postmodernist ideas allowing people who were previously rejected by traditional philosophies to “[formulate] their own narratives as subjects, producing a multiplication of discourses” (Ferrando, 2012, p. 12). Thus, we are able to overcome the hierarchical dichotomy that presented the “correct” type of human as a white, Western, heterosexual male (Braidotti, 2016). Posthumanism is an ambiguous ideology that shifts, evolves, and adapts as the needs of those it was created for change. The inclusion of all perspectives, human or otherwise, is one of the main goals of posthumanism. It recognizes that “difference is embedded in the human species itself, with all of its gendered, racial, ethnic, social, individual varieties” (Ferrando, 2012, p. 12). These embedded traits not found in all humans are socially constructed differences pushed on people since birth (Berkowitz, 2010) allowing posthumanism to be decentralized by not conceding a “specific type of human to symbolically represent” all of humanity (Ferrando, 2012, p. 12). Posthumanism expands past the idea that there is no one type of person to represent humanity and rejects the notion of representationalism as a whole. In order to move toward a posthumanist future, we must consider “human experience in its full spectrum” (Ferrando, 2012, p. 12). By doing so, we can offer a version of the future that “will radically stretch the boundaries of human comprehension” (Ferrando, 2012, p. 12).

In the simplest of terms, pragmatism is the application of anti-essentialism to concepts of philosophical theorizing such as “‘truth,’ ‘knowledge,’ ‘language,’ [and] ‘morality’” (Rorty, 1980). Another characteristic of pragmatism is the belief that “there is no epistemological difference between truth about what ought to be and truth about what is” (Rorty, 1980, p. 723). This means there is only reality and factors that exist in real time, no universal truth waiting to be discovered. Pragmatism also promotes the idea that there are “no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of objects” and the only constraints that exist are the ones we have created (Rorty, 1980, p. 726). To be pragmatic is to give up on the idea that

there is a singular universal truth provided by an “underwriter of our present world-picture” and to abandon that time and philosophical study will enable us to discover that truth (Rorty, 1980, p. 722). If we accept that “truth, like reality, is [not] one and seamless,” and that there is no one correct truth or one correct reality, then the conditions exist for which to create a more inclusive and accepting world (Rorty, 1998, p. 270). Recognizing a plurality of worlds would allow for the creation of an improved “society [that] would make possible ever-proliferating human diversity” (Rorty, 1998, p. 270). Throughout history white religious fundamentalists have justified the mistreatment of people of color, women, and homosexuals on the basis that they, the fundamentalists, were the correct type of human, and that their discriminatory practices enabled them to discover universal truth. When we throw out these essentialist ideas, the differences between us cease to matter, and we are able to create a more inclusive and accepting world.

Because the ideas of postmodernism, posthumanism, and pragmatism share the themes of rejecting the idea that there is one universal truth or one ideal type of person while advocating for the inclusion of all different types of people, this shared rhetoric can be used to both advocate for feminism and further our understanding of it. We refer to these methodologies as pragmatic posthumanism. Throughout history, science and religion have been used as a justification to deprive both men and women of certain rights and treatments. However, unlike men, “women have been systematically deprived” of their rights alone (Hogan, 1993, p. 46). A pragmatic posthuman feminism would grant us the discarding of the notion of intrinsic human rights and values, solely based on gender.

The unique overlapping of ideas and vocabularies in pragmatic posthuman feminism provides a novel framework for understanding tomboys. Girls viewed as tomboys are often marginalized because the term is “a pejorative label implying gender deviance” due to the presentation of masculine traits instead of feminine traits (Carr, 1998, pp. 530-531). By disregarding the idea that there is one correct type of girl, we are able to create multiple discourses and definitions for what it means to be a girl and to thoroughly analyze the evolution of the tomboy figure.

3. Perception of the tomboy in literature:

A tomboy is a girl who partakes in activities that are traditionally associated with boys. In other words, a girl becomes a tomboy when she so-called denies femininity and embraces masculinity (Hall, 2008; Paechter, 2010; Paechter & Clark, 2007). This definition is descriptive of the way children

view the tomboy role; they believe there to be “girl actions” and “boy actions” (Paechter, 2010). Tomboys appear in many places, among which are film, television, and literature. As such, our analysis will center on the literary tomboy, who gained popularity during the Civil War, seeing as the women of this period had to begin participating in the work they had deemed “masculine” (Abate, 2008). One particular tomboy, Jo March, has attracted attention through a significant work of American literature written by Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*. It was published in 1868, following the Civil War, where Jo is one example of the tomboys that emerged from that era. She was depicted as a young girl, the second of her sisters, who desired to be a boy. Her younger sister, Beth, tells her “you must try to be contented with making your name boyish, and playing brother to us girls” (Abate, 2008, p. 9). Throughout much of the novel, Jo’s older sister, Meg, served to discipline her in the ways that a young girl her age ought to act. She yells at her for being unladylike multiple times, and she criticizes her at times when she is acting in a way that Meg believes to be “boyish.”

Two places in which children enact the behaviors they associate with femininity and masculinity include the classroom and playground environments. Such mannerisms are taught to children through ideological apparatuses, such as mass culture, school, family, and books, as evidenced in Alcott’s *Little Women* (Althusser, 1971). The school apparatus dictates not only the stories school children are required to read, but also the way in which they are to behave while playing. Boys are to participate in games that require them to be active and adventurous while taking up much space in the playground, leaving the girls with little space and not much else to do (Paechter & Clark, 2007). Thus, the boys who play active sports such as football are apprehensive of letting a girl play with them, leaving tomboys with no means by which to carry out activities related to tomboy identities; instead, they resort to walking around the playground and talking (Paechter & Clark, 2007). This act of walking and talking can direct young girls to feel as if any sort of active play on their parts turn them into an anomaly and an outcast. This particular study can be generalized to other school environments, where gender roles on the playground are evident, particularly when examined through a non-posthumanist perspective.

One of the ways school children develop a fixed understanding of gender is through the stories they are required to read, and this understanding carries through in their actions. In one study, young children in primary school were given tasks as early as sixth grade, one of which involved them looking after younger children. The researchers discovered that the sixth-grade girls were more inclined to take these responsibilities more seriously than the boys (Paechter & Clark, 2007). This trend can be contextualized if one looks to the novels popular among primary school

aged children. Again, we see this in *Little Women*, where traits such as responsibility are reinforced as being “feminine.” Near the end of the novel, as Jo makes the recurring shift to what is generally deemed feminine, her older sister, Meg, tells her that “[i]t’s just what you need to bring out the tender womanly half of your nature, Jo” (Alcott, 1868, p. 415). Meg refers to the “nature” of Jo’s womanhood in this sentence, perpetuating this anti-posthumanist perspective onto her sister as well as the readers. The juvenile minds of primary school aged children thus develop a perception of the way they ought to act on the basis of fixed gender and what is “natural.” This sentence from the novel serves to confine the actions of adolescent tomboys, who have been preoccupied with purported “boyish tricks” as Jo was, in need of “remember[ing] that [she is] a young lady” (Alcott, 1868, p. 9).

Jo, along with two other notable fictional characters, Topsy, from Harriett Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and Dai An, from Yang Hongying’s *Tomboy Dai An*, present parallel cases. All three tomboys complete their character arc by developing into women who embody characteristics traditionally belonging to femininity, such as compassion, nurturing, and an aptitude for needlework (Abate, 2008; Shen, 2018). The characterization of Jo is described as allowing the tomboy to “retain an essential heterosexuality” (Quimby, 2013, p. 6). This criticism of the term “essential” draws back on the notion of certain qualities being described by terms such as “natural,” or “ideal,” thus tying them to femininity and to being a girl. *Tomboy Dai An* presents gender from an anti-posthumanist perspective, as it is looked to for “its construction of an ideal womanhood” (Shen, 2017, p. 278). Elliott (1998) criticizes the use of such terms, making evident the awareness of foundational terminology in the literature that serves to analyze gender and the tomboy figure. Also noted is the coerciveness of publishers in this outcome; they ensure that the author makes use of this pervasive conclusion as seen for tomboys in literature. This phenomenon is observed due to the publishers’ taking control of the dominant ideology, where they decide the “obvious” ways to act (Althusser, 1971). They depict an image of the tomboy figure described as “disorderly...of indeterminate sex and changeable gender,” while the development into a traditionally feminine role is characterized as returning “to domestic principles of duty and obedience” (Elliott, 1998, p. 96). Portrayal of one role as disordered and one as dutiful and obedient makes apparent the publishers’ desire of the ideology to which they want the working class to conform (Althusser, 1971).

The trajectory from tomboy adolescent to traditionally feminine woman is described as a “withdrawal of the outlaw figure from the text in order to accommodate the editorial policies of the publisher, which require a capitulation to heterosexual and domestic conventions in their

conclusions” (Elliot, 1998, p. 93). These “domestic conclusions” are required in part due to the desires of the readers, and the conclusions are those “which audiences expected” (Elliot, 1998). Audiences expect these conclusions due to the patriarchal society in which the stories are set, where they are coerced into an ideological submission that defines what is feminine and what is masculine (Althusser, 1971; Rubin, 1975). It is for such a reason that Alcott(1868) married off Jo, a character she was fully intent on leaving as a literary spinster (Quimby, 2013). Caught between publishers and the young women who wrote to her, Alcott married Jo to Mr. Bhaer, at which point in the novel Jo no longer wrote thrillers but rather opting to write romantic stories (Elliot, 1998). Furthermore, the phrase “accommodate the editorial policies” refers to the publishers, whose intention was to project the ending they believed to be the “correct” conclusion. With this, the publishers pushed the tomboy character arc due to the belief that readers wanted reaffirmation of the supremacy of traditional gender norms. Such roles for women include the certainty and appropriateness of remaining obedient and dutiful, and literary examples surface again and again within this foundational context.

In opposition to such roles, the fictional Pippi Longstocking represents a juxtaposition to the obedient, dutiful young women of the period. In *Pippi Longstocking*, author Astrid Lindgren (1950) portrays Pippi as a tomboy, independent and strong. Similar to Alcott’s (1868) Jo, Lindgren (1950) features Pippi as the heroine who would “face dangers and take risks” and “followed her own instincts and trusted her own judgement and common sense” (Kim, 2012, p. 322). Lindgren (1950), however, softened Pippi’s edginess for a more domesticated, modest character than her original portrayal (Lundqvist, 1990, p. 99), interjecting feminine values stemming from foundational worldviews. Another literary character experiencing change from tomboy to a more feminine role is J.R.R. Tolkien’s (1954) Éowyn in *The Lord of the Rings* series. Smith (2007) notes that Éowyn’s character fails to be an exemplary “homebound war bride” and that Éowyn’s “experiences, temperament, and desires” are in “direct opposition in compliance with this mode of thinking” (Smith, 2007, pp. 161-162). However, like Lindgren’s (1950) Pippi, Tolkien’s (1954) Éowyn is unable to completely assume the role of a tomboy; rather, her role as “warbride” is only allowed to send her husband to battle without a smile (feminine) and relegated to disguising herself as a man in order to truly do what she wants (masculine) (Griffin, 2007, p. 223; Smith, 2007, pp. 166-167). That is, it was acceptable for a woman to “face danger and take risks” within a foundationalist framework of femininity, but to place a woman directly into a masculine role was unacceptable. Authors’ attempts to

empower female characters remained entrenched in foundationalist views that reinforced the nature of gender-specific roles: feminine and masculine.

The nature of gender is alluded to multiple times in a study done on elementary aged children, implying that, for these young girls, there is a nature to gender (Holloway, 2000). The girls who identified as tomboys believed that they would outgrow it as they entered their adolescent years. This springs from a fear of being an outsider to other students, as shown in one particular quote taken from a sixth-grade student who was interviewed. She claimed that if she never stopped being a tomboy, people would begin think of her as a lesbian. This prospect would not be one she feared if it were not for the hostile playground environment that favored gender conformity into “masculine” and “feminine” roles. The traits children believe to be either masculine or feminine are partly established through books they read that depict a girl partaking in one activity and a boy taking part in another activity. The traits are carried into schools, which “represent social and political structures, containing assumptions about how people (that is largely children) ought best to be” (Holloway, 2000, p. 184). The phrase “ought best to be” perpetuates the prominence of the tomboy character arc, turning them into feminine role models. It is the reason that publishers are responsible for pressuring writers to change their endings in order to create a story that would sell to the people who believed that there is a way it “ought best to be.”

The strict gender roles in schools that create such aggressive playground dynamics, on our reading, can be tied to the foundational language, as a reflection of foundational ideology, that has linked certain attributes to either femininity or masculinity. Thus, the tomboy figure is often looked to as either “pathological signs of gender dysphasia or as an indication of self-affirmation, independence and agency” (Shen, 2018, p. 655). The former description is employed when traits associated with femininity are spoken about as if they are inherent to being a woman. In such a case, tomboys, who are defined as girls taking part in so-called boy activities are not seen as individuals, but rather as an irregularity, or a pathology. The latter, however, represents a case in which pragmatic language was used, seeing as this description makes use of an individual’s choice—that is, her “independence.” To help in the liberation of young girls who do not embody certain characteristics or enjoy particular activities typically associated with femininity, we advocate for a shift in practice. This precise movement drives our language away from the use of foundational terms toward pragmatic ones. If we refrain from doing so, girls who do not fit the traditional norm—i.e., who do not display traits attributed to femininity—will continue to be subjected to a foundationally informed

shunning or, at minimum, expected to respond using a foundationally conceived vocabulary (Paechter & Clark, 2007).

To cultivate classroom and playground environments that are characteristic of such independence, we should try reading different kinds of books. Sharon Dennis Wyeth's (1998) *Tomboy Trouble* tells the story of a young tomboy named Georgia, who was constantly ridiculed for dressing and acting like a boy. In such instances, Georgia would "reaffirm her female identity while challenging conventional constraints on girlhood," e.g., she would make statements such as "I'm no kind of boy, I'm just my own kind of girl" (Shen, 2018, p. 656). Selecting books such as this one, in which the main character exercises independence and individuality, could help to make it acceptable for children to construct their own identities, as Georgia does. Georgia's character makes use of pragmatic language in creating her own identity when she claims that she is her own type of girl, as opposed to conforming to the conventional feminine role. A pragmatic classroom would be one in which Georgia from *Tomboy Trouble* becomes a commonly read and thus normal character for children to see as acceptable and admirable.

4. Societally bound:

Pressures to conform to distinct gender roles of feminine or masculine are boundaries that encompass children's identities. The tomboy personality is surrounded by boundaries restricting the development of a child's identity. These restrictions are not tangible; rather, they are immaterial "symbolic boundaries," "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space" (Lamont, 2002, p. 168). Within this socially-constructed categorization of gender roles, women have been assigned criteria of behaviors that restrict feminine expression. Furthermore, symbolic boundaries categorize a "dominant view of male identity" that "emphasizes men as tough, aggressive, independent, sexually active, rational, and intelligent," whereas "[w]omen are seen as weak, caring, passive, frightened, stupid, and dependent" (Crocco, 2001, p. 66). From the viewpoint of a dominant view of male identity, to be female is to be lesser both physically and mentally. Thus, the creation of binary gender categories restricts women's identities and behaviors. Determining what is acceptable gender behavior establishes boundaries that confront the tomboy. Sociologically speaking, behaviors are unspoken norms, or rules, within society that govern, and therefore especially limit, feminine expression. Societal norms can prompt individuals to scorn and despise women who break from feminine behaviors, especially those of the tomboy.

Societal norms affect individual identity choices. The tomboy identity has brought freedom of expression to young women, allowing them to break from feminine boundaries. However, tomboys are not represented as having feminine qualities. Tomboys express masculine qualities such as being independent, strong, and active. Expressions of a tomboy personality can be demonstrated through sports, career choices, and appearances. The choice to express such qualities represents freedom for the tomboy because symbolic boundaries have been confronted. Women can be strong and express masculinity through sports and outside work without denying a sense of femininity. Research shows how symbolic boundaries are formed around young women. For example, in an account of women's gender roles in adolescence, "Dana recalled that her mother told her that if she 'didn't act more like a girl, look more like a girl, dress more like a girl, [that she] wouldn't be accepted by society...wouldn't find a husband'" (Carr, 2007, p. 443). Dana's mother espouses an ideology that men and women have only one "true" form. As such, women should represent someone who cooks, cleans, cares for children, and dresses to fit a defined role. Femininity and feminine gender roles construct an ideal identity as "girly-girl." Gender roles are defined not only by what individuals do and how they act, but also how they present themselves, their appearance.

Appearance is one aspect of identity presentation, including but not limited to one's choice of color in clothing. For example, the color pink is not seen as a color of power, but rather is generally associated with the gendered norm of feminine identity that defines girls' acceptance within society. Perceived benefits of social acceptance and affirmation lead women into forgoing appearances that represent who they are. Not only choice of color in clothing but also any physical display that stimulates others' senses determines how society will view a woman. The way a woman expresses herself through her appearance can be connected to both the color pink and her behaviors because the color pink is often assumed to express a submissive behavior. Individuals who wear pink are expected to have subordinate qualities, in contrast to a dominant male view of identity. In the case of tomboys, they "openly subvert binary, gender, and sexual categories through their deliberate mixtures of clothing, makeup, jewelry, hair styles, behavior, names and use of language" (Lorber, 1999, p. 362). Society defines what is masculine and what is feminine. Gender boundaries bifurcate our perception of masculine and feminine and polarize their acceptance when boundaries are broken.

Girls who break free from boundaries fall into a category *between* 'the boys' and 'the girls,' and the tomboy category is brought forth through this system of separation. Specifically, separation is observed on the primary school playground during socializing (Paechter, 2006). Research

has revealed that the separation between boys and girls is present during playground socialization. Within that context of prepubescent socializing, “[w]hen gender boundaries are activated, the loose aggregation ‘boys and girls’ consolidates into ‘the boys’ and ‘the girls’ as separate and reified groups” (Paechter, 2006; Thorne, 1993, p. 65). Because masculinity is connected with being more active, girls who choose to be active on the playground play separately from the girly-girls. Hence, they are identified and labeled as tomboys. Unfortunately, “[d]espite the strong political commitments of many child-centered educators, characterizations of their work often reflect gendered assumptions that deny their social convictions and their recognition of the socio-political implications of pedagogy” (Moyer, 2009, p. 535). Thus, child-centered education systems rely on gender norms within an environment that negatively separate tomboys, behaviors and attitudes that are centered around tradition.

In addition, Moyer (2009) found that gender norms were not considered in child-centered educational systems, revealing a “larger weakness in community-school programmes” due to “the lack of an underlying social philosophy” (2009, p. 542). Further, the use of non-posthumanistic language encloses masculinity and femininity within boundaries that restrict the tomboy from emerging in women, because “[social reconstructionism’s] coherence as a category rests in part on its opposition to child-centred progressivism—an opposition infused with the politics of gender” (Moyer, 2009, p. 544). This implies that gender politics are a concrete way to establish the social interactions of children within the education system. Thus, coherence is a necessary condition to establish a logical understanding of non-binary genders. Non-pragmatic language limits an individual to the concept that there are only specific, defined ways a woman can act and that all women are restricted to such norms and gender subjugation. For example, the use of non-pragmatic language in athletics reveals that “athletics brought boys high status,” and that the “pervasive atmosphere of male dominance in these schools led all too frequently to intimidation of girls by boys and even to sexual harassment” (Crocco, 2001, p. 67). A positive way to change the educational system is to have teachers confront these unbalanced social patterns and bridge the gap between genders while keeping an open mind about expression (Crocco, 2001). To reduce boundaries that embody judgment, there needs to be a step forward in understanding why individuals express themselves a certain way. Tomboys ought to be able to depend on educators to move past old ways of thought and move toward new, unified approaches.

Tomboys appear more prevalently in the population of younger girls within the educational system. Feminine identities tend to disappear as social constructs are revealed to the tomboy as she matures into society.

Rapid changes in educational environments spark a decline in young women accepting their tendency to be more “masculine.” Women report ceasing “tomboyism in adolescence due to maturation, heterosexual interests or expectations, and pressures by parents and peers” (Carr, 2007, p. 446). Peer pressure forces young women to hide who they are and to conform to a society that limits women to a particular category of expectations. As a result, young women suppress expressions of masculinity in favor of feminine expressions to conform to ideal expressions more accepted in society. As the research confirms, “Tamika [a tomboy] explained that, although she had ‘femmed up’ her appearance and posture in adolescence, she retained an assertive and even domineering personality” (Carr, 2007, p. 446). Tamika had been trained to alter her tomboy appearance to fit in and to match those accepted as feminine, but she chose to preserve particular masculine traits. This negotiation of symbolic boundaries and life experiences influenced Tamika’s distinct choices to maintain societal expectations of what it means to be feminine.

However, there is not just one way to be feminine. Although society has ascribed a set of guidelines that both sexes are expected to follow, individual experience informs what it means to be feminine for each woman. Researchers found that “[p]ersonality characteristics, feelings, motivations, and ambitions flow from these different life experiences so that the members of these different groups become different kinds of people” (Lorber, 1994, p. 15). No two women are the same. Defining women by a series of norms denies their acceptance as young, strong women who break the bounds encasing them. Ignoring qualities of one’s own identity to please others leads to other damaging aspects. For example, “Girls who participate in gender stereotyped activities are most likely to suffer depression, low self-esteem, and disordered eating” (McGan, 1995, p. 21). Denying a plurality of identities, while accepting only one, singular identity, perpetuates conformity that universally damages humanity, encouraging boundaries that restrict the growth and development of individuals. Humanity is an aspect of identity, and placing constrictions upon it reduces or removes the opportunity to place humanity at the center of society. Not being able to express what is inside, limits the role that identification plays within a compassionate humanistic society. With suppression comes a lack of humanity needed to understand individual personality development through the freedom of expression.

5. Beyond justification:

The non-posthumanist mindset, in its foundationalism, is used as justification for the treatment of tomboys, whether it is discriminatory or accepting. Public uses of religion have been used as the rationale for preserving two distinct, separate sexes, thus resulting in discrimination against the tomboy. Religious organizations involved in the public sphere are especially notorious for enforcing a gender binary system. Promoting religious political agendas is how religious organizations such as the Promise Keepers, Focus on the Family, and Christian Coalition of America garner support for their causes. In addition to being foundationalists, the organization's leaders are fundamentalists who want biblical laws and principles to be included in government, stating that "Christians must become actively involved in restoring every facet of society, including government, to the biblical values of our Founding Fathers" (Hedy & Lagrander, 1999, p. 100). They believe that church and state should be one, influencing politics and the public sphere by shaping the attitudes of its members. Their intent is to spark a reaction in favor of the involvement of religion in politics and to portray those who do not fit the mold as the enemy.

According to these organizations, differences between males and females are "hardwired," so non-biological lines—i.e., references to social or cultural "gender"—for them, should not cross over into separately demarcated borders (Hedy & Lagrander, 1999, p. 103). Thus, gender boundaries work to confine tomboys into *the boys* or *the girls* category, with no room for interplay or border crossing. In such dichotomous terms, tomboys certainly do not resemble the ideal woman, and thereby do not fit within the boundaries determined by society, thus making them the enemies of religious fundamentalist organizations. Because tomboys are considered anti-conservative, leaders like Pat Robertson attempt to worry the public with the notion that women possessing proprietorship over their own lives threaten to "destroy salvation's cradle [and] encourage women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians" (Hedy & Lagrander, 1999, p. 102).

Science, on the other hand, provides legitimacy for accepting tomboys. Scientists have found a correlation between prenatal exposure to high levels of androgen in tomboys, suggesting that tomboys are not made, but rather are born. Two syndromes arise from excess prenatal androgen in females. One of the syndromes is Adrenogenital syndrome (AGS) or Congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH), which results in "large amounts of adrenocortical androgens being secreted by [the] fetus" (D. Quadagno, Briscoe, & J. Quadagno, 1977, p. 68). The other is progestin-induced

hermaphroditism (PIH), a syndrome caused by the intake of synthetic progesterin to prevent abortions during pregnancy. High levels of androgen in tomboys can be a result of sensitive receptors (Bailey, Bechtold, & Berenbaum, 2002, p. 334). The prenatal androgens can cause sex differences in the brain, which results in behavioral sex differences (Bailey, Bechtold, & Berenbaum, 2002, p. 334). Self-reported interviews done by PIH and AGS young female subjects revealed that they considered themselves tomboys. AGS and CAH girls have higher energy levels, which has been linked to the preference of male playmates over female, one aspect of the tomboy identity (D. Quadagno, Briscoe, & J. Quadagno, 1977, p. 68). Multiple studies have found that CAH women were more likely to be described as tomboys than women without CAH (Bailey, Bechtold, & Berenbaum, 2002, p. 334; D. Quadagno, Briscoe, & J. Quadagno, 1977, p. 68;). Such clinical studies support the notion of nature over nurture. From studies done on AGS and PIH girls, studies have also examined the right hands of pregnant women and their levels of sex-hormone-binding globulins. Findings included the observation that lower 2nd digit to 4th digit ratio (2D:4D) on the right hand is also correlated with an increased probability of the child's being called a tomboy during childhood (Atkinson, Smulders, & Wallenberg, 2017, p. 10). The significance of a study like the 2D:4D indicates that there is a possible bias toward organizational effects of androgens in the uterus and tomboy qualities (Atkinson, Smulders, & Wallenberg, 2017, p. 11). Another study found that women who were exposed to "higher levels of sex hormone binding globulins during their second trimester of fetal life were more psychologically masculine than other women" (Bailey, Bechtold, & Berenbaum, 2002, p. 334).

Tomboys cannot control fetal conditions and genetics, and research has shown that these conditions are biological in nature. Recently, people have become more accepting of tomboy expressions. Science has helped to educate the public regarding pre-birth indications, and acceptance is evidenced in the increased representation of tomboys in cultural production mediums. During the 1970s, for instance, "various fictional tomboys continued to take center stage in literature and Hollywood" (King, 2017, para. 13). The trend became even more apparent during this time because of the rise of the women's liberation movement. Advertisements, in fact, began featuring tomboys to promote products. For example, in 1981, LEGO "depicted a young girl with braids, baggy jeans, tennis shoes, and a T-shirt, holding a messy LEGO creation" (King, 2017, para. 15). Because time of prenatal exposure to high levels of androgens has been linked to tomboys, science can be seen as a positive influence in growing acceptance.

Pragmatists reject religious fundamentalism used in the public sphere for political purposes in order to justify discrimination and intolerance of women, including those who identify as tomboys. Although one may agree with the scientific basis for which research has provided a justification for extending tolerance toward tomboys, it is important to reject the metaphysical need to offer something scientific, or biological, that serves as an additional underpinning—philosophical or otherwise—to rationalize decent treatment of tomboys. Overall, we advocate a change in the vocabulary used to describe the tomboy figure; or, conversely, we wish to abandon the whole metaphysical conversation that relies on justificatory reasons as a means to substantiate and thus legitimize *any* treatment at all, “fair” or “unfair.” Again, we share the same social ends with such scientific conclusions for extending decency but seek to sidestep the religious fundamentalists’—or anyone’s, for that matter—preferred method of linguistic description that involves foundationalism. This is, according to Rorty, (1989) a rhetorical strategy to deny “the objector his choice of weapons and terrain by meeting his criticisms head-on” (p. 44). Our objective, however, is not to replace religious or scientific jargon with some philosophical appeal. That, too, would imply an *a priori* privileged position to the argument and to the world, thus taking a form of essentialism in its own right and violating the features of the posthumanist pragmatism we have recommended. We maintain that pragmatic posthumanism offers a better conceptual framework and the rhetorical advantages to get beyond the outmoded, back-and-forth debate that Plato started more than two millennia ago. By institutionalizing this methodological alternative, and thereby further establishing the credibility of fluid identity, women “would no longer need to raise what seem [as] unanswerable questions about the accuracy for their representation of a ‘woman’s experience’” (Rorty, 2010, p. 338).

6. Summary and conclusion:

Along with Rorty (2010), we seek to shed such justifications that assume there is a single Truth, and that humans generally, and tomboys specifically, are defined by some predetermined ingredient which conforms with the “Way the World Is.” Instead, we perceive beings as continually adapting and creating new versions of themselves (Rorty, 2010, p. 333). To this end, we have investigated the tomboy figure as she has appeared in children’s literature as well as how the tomboy has evolved over the course of her character arc. We have explored the concept of boundaries and their role in limiting what a woman should or should not do based on her patriarchal-assigned role. We followed with an analysis of how educational systems

allow for such boundaries to leave lasting impressions on children. Granting recognition and extending decency toward those, like the tomboy, living beyond the socially engineered intuitive can more easily foster the cultural conditions conducive for expanding the spaces in which individuality is celebrated and where borders once limited the imagination for how to be. This expansion becomes increasingly more tangible when surveying the transformation of the tomboy figure through the posthumanist pragmatic lens used in this paper.

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