

Kathleen Forrester

## Nature Unnested

### Kin and Kind in Switched Egg Children's Stories

*Abstract: In Hans Christian Andersen's iconic fairy tale, Den grimme ælling (The Ugly Duckling, 1843), we learn that "it does not matter that one has been born in the henyard as long as one has lain in a swan's egg." Claims to supremacy, worth, and belonging are nested in a children's story about "nature" and bolstered by biological notions of kin and kind – some eggs are naturally better than others. Since Andersen's nineteenth-century tale, the lost/found/switched egg narrative has become a trope in children's literature, particularly in stories that explore themes of family and belonging, and yet little scholarly attention has been given to the egg in this regard. Drawing on queer, feminist, and posthumanist frameworks inspired by Donna Haraway's natureculture thinking, this article examines the deployment of the egg-switch trope in Andersen's The Ugly Duckling, in relation to two contemporary picturebooks, And Tango Makes Three (Richardson and Parnell, 2005), and The Odd Egg (Gravett, 2008). I treat the material-symbolic presence of the egg in these texts as a generative site for interrogating the construction and perpetuation of dominant notions of kin and kind, considering the complex and slippery ways that nature is called upon to uphold ideas of exceptionalism and normativity through discourses of origin and species. At the same time, acknowledging the concurrent conservative and radical potentialities of literature for children (Jaques), and guided by Rosi Braidotti's affirmative ethics and Eve Sedgwick's queer reparative approaches to criticism, I also read these texts as imaginative sites for noticing and theorizing alternative queer models of relationality that elevate chosen, non-biological, and cross-species kin.*

**Keywords:** kinship, nature, human exceptionalism, picturebooks, worldbuilding, eggs, naturecultures, Haraway, queer ecologies, posthumanism, affirmative ethics, reparative reading

*It does not matter that one has been born in the henyard as long as one has  
lain in a swan's egg.*  
(Andersen, *The Ugly Duckling* 137)

*Tropes are what make us want to look and need to listen for surprises that  
get us out of inherited boxes.*  
(Haraway, "The Companion Species Manifesto" 124)

In word, theme, and image, *eggs* – of one kind or another – speckle the pages of children's literature.<sup>1</sup> Pick up a book about farm animals, for instance, and somewhere tucked beneath a hen or duck or in a lonely nest you will find eggs, or the idea of eggs. Turn to "spring" in a book on the seasons, and again, eggs, this time hatching or hatched. Grocery shopping or baking a cake? The illustration will likely show eggs. Or, as is the case in the opening of Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969), an egg (or many eggs) will invariably play a role in narratives about animal life cycles. In stories featuring birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, insects, dragons, and humans as well, the *egg* in texts for young readers is ever-present, and yet it often flies beneath the radar of critical attention. This would perhaps not be surprising if it were always the case that eggs were simply accessories to a larger narrative, but in many children's stories – particularly ones exploring notions of family and belonging – it is *the egg* that gives weight and complexity to the entire story. As screens for projection, eggs in children's books are imprinted with human desires and cultural obsessions pertaining to reproduction, growth, technology, embodiment, childhood, and parenthood. As such, the figure of the egg can be read as deeply implicated in complex, and sometimes oppressive, debates about who and what makes a "natural" family. Ubiquitous on the page, the egg in children's literature is a figure that warrants a closer examination.

In this article, I narrow my critical attention to three egg texts from within the canon of children's literature – one fairy tale, Hans Christian Andersen's *Den grimme ælling* (*The Ugly Duckling*, 1843), and two contemporary picturebooks, Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell's *And Tango Makes Three* (2005), illustrated by Henry Cole, and Emily Gravett's *The Odd Egg* (2008).<sup>2</sup> Each of these narratives turn on the trope of the "lost," "found" or "switched" egg, a trope that can be traced through a number of historical and contemporary children's stories.<sup>3</sup> The eggs featured in these stories are those of birds and reptiles, but figuratively these eggs trace entangled interspecies lines all the way down through the deep space-time-significances of history. I argue that the material-symbolic presence of *the egg* in

these texts provides generative sites for examining and contesting assumed categories and naturalized practices of kin-making, while also creating space for knowing and imagining kinship otherwise.

With perhaps the well-known exception of the anthropomorphized character Humpty-Dumpty, children's stories and cultural texts do not tend to grant a speaking voice to eggs. This does not mean, however, that eggs are without agency or affect. In the neo-Spinozist, non-dualistic, relational ontologies of new materialism in which "all matter ... is intelligent and self-organizing in both human and non-human organisms" (Braidotti 34), eggs – whether a bird's hard shell egg, frogspawn, or a single cell human ovum – are fleshy *and* figurative actors in coevolutionary hi/stories of becoming. Eggs are corporeal multiplicities, undetermined worlds of material-discursive potential; they merge and collapse matter and meaning, protein and possibility, outside and inside, subject and object along with all manner of other humanist dualisms. In the context of children's literature, and in egg-switch stories in particular, the figure of the egg invites an investigation of those naturalized and sometimes mythologised stories of genealogical and ancestral family that have come to underpin normative understandings of kinship (Haraway, *Staying With* 103).

*Egg*, as a concept, evokes a multitude of contradictory and overlapping significances that are both political and highly personalized in meaning and affect – from IVF and frozen gametes, to cage farming and fish hatcheries, to fertility rituals and Easter parades. At once reproductive and non-reproductive, *the egg* in popular parlance is imbued with an array of situated meanings that blur together notions of nature and culture in provocative ways. A chicken's egg, for example, might signify breakfast *and* the possibility of new life, while a human egg in a petri dish might signify the booming multi-billion dollar industry of Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) as well as a longed for biological child. The egg traverses the seams of animate and inanimate, born and made, and as such raises uncomfortable questions about humanness and futurity, origin and species.

In this way, eggs, not unlike Donna Haraway's cyborg, might be encountered as "theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" ("A Cyborg Manifesto" 7), providing a particularly potent figure through which to think about nature and culture, not as "polarised opposites" or "universal categories," but as historically linked and immanently interwoven "*naturecultures*" (Haraway, "Companion Species" 100).<sup>4</sup> The egg, in this regard, makes for an accessible figure through which to disrupt persistent anthropocentric

notions that “human nature” is somehow distinct and central within all of “nature” – being (in) an egg, after all, is an experience that crosses species borders. Learning from Haraway, I employ an intersectional, queer, and multispecies feminist politics to tend to the everyday ways in which our storied realities are entangled with eggs.

In children’s literature there is an implicit and sometimes explicit mechanism of socialization at work in which the youngest members of a population are exposed to and (potentially) interpellated into the practices and values of a given society. As such, stories for children are intricately bound up in *reproducing* the future. Children’s literature is often critiqued for its conservative tendencies, in this regard, as a tool of liberal humanism that upholds hegemonic ideologies of self, family, community, and nation while silencing alternative ways of being, knowing, and relating. Certainly, as many Marxist feminists and others have shown, capitalist enterprise cannot be parsed out from (social and biological) reproduction (Hurley 151), and children’s literature might be said to play a political role in bridging the private and public spheres for the reproduction of the next generation of workers and consumers. However, texts for the young are far too complex, diverse, and paradoxical to be understood as solely pedagogical props for acculturating and inoculating the young into narrow norms and as such, following Zoe Jaques, I seek to read children’s literature as cultural texts that offer radically alternative visions of the world, affording “sophisticated interventions” (Jaques 5) into debates about human/non-human categories of difference and belonging. I take up the egg as an everyday, overlooked, figure through which to theorize and complicate stories about the “nature” of kin and kind. Theorizing egg-switch trope children’s stories as an ethical and imaginative act of worldbuilding, I seek to elaborate and elevate alternative kinship figurations and kin-making possibilities beyond hegemonic narratives of humanist, hetero-reproductive family.

Thinking about the future-oriented, worldbuilding potential of children’s fictions, Kimberley Reynolds writes: “Many children’s books offer quirky or critical or alternative visions of the world designed to provoke that ultimate response of childhood, ‘Why?’ ‘Why are things as they are?’ ‘Why can’t they be different?’” (3). In this article I triage “Why?” with “How?” and “What if?” to offer a “reparative” (Sedgwick) and “affirmative” (Braidotti) critical analysis of my three selected texts that is at once “interpretive and imaginative” (Greteman 47). My inquiry is informed by three questions: *Why* is the egg-switch trope such a popular choice for exploring themes of

family and belonging in children's books? *How* does this trope employ "nature" in relation to inter-related notions of "kin," "kind," "origin," and "species"? And *What if* this egg-switch trope also offers opportunities for reimaginings of kin-making practices that shift our individual and collective understandings of what it means to be human in relation to the world?

I take up Rosi Braidotti's posthuman affirmative ethics and Eve Sedgwick's queer reparative reading praxis as guiding stars (from different parts of the disciplinary sky) by which to set my position, direction, and course. In their light, criticism can never be just an act of record keeping, or a negative cartography of times passed, rather criticism is immanently tied to possibility, survival, sustenance, speculation, and surprise. While I do engage in what Sedgwick would call "paranoid reading" in the first part of this article, interpreting and examining some of the negative discourses of Andersen's *The Ugly Duckling* and Richardson and Parnell's *And Tango Makes Three* as a kind of exercise in mapping the complex performativity of "nature," this is not my critical resting place. In the second half of the article I take a reparative stance engaging the pleasures, paradoxes, and queer possibilities of the texts by reading them in other ways alongside Gravett's *The Odd Egg* to think more expansively about family and kin. This queer literary approach aligns, on a broader conceptual level, with Braidotti's new materialist qualitative shift toward an affirmative ethics in which critical cartographies are creative endeavours (34), recording "both what we are ceasing to be and what we are in the process of becoming" (37). There is a hopeful slant to my criticism, for *if* the present is nonlinear and multidirectional, as Braidotti (inspired by Deleuze) suggests, then theorizing the present moment can be a nonlinear multidirectional act also – simultaneously stretching into the past and future and finding, as Sedgwick did, that neither was/is inevitable. Just as "the past ... could have happened differently from the way it actually did" (146), so might we yet become something other than what we are.

## Exceptional Eggs

Immersed in social and cultural discourses on "natural" kin-making, the egg-switch trope in children's literature provides fertile grounds for examining hi/stories that inform our present moment. Tropes are figures of language (word, phrase, and image) that are woven into everyday communication and stories. Tropes tend to present with a

concretized authority, an exterior shell of closed meaning that – not unlike eggs – with a little pressure in the right place can be cracked open to reveal complex layers of meaning and matter. Tropes are familiar signposts that point us toward strange places; they are the turn in meaning-making processes that invite plurality and possibility. Put another way, and to quote Haraway from the epigraph of this article, “[t]ropes are what make us want to look and need to listen for surprises that get us out of inherited boxes” (“Companion Species” 124).

The trope of the switched egg children’s story traces a historical and intertextual line of affiliation back to the mid-nineteenth century and Hans Christian Andersen’s canonical fairy tale, *The Ugly Duckling*, in which a large egg of unknown origin finds its way into a duck’s nest at the edge of an old castle moat. The mother duck, whose nest it is, waits for the large egg to hatch, but is ultimately confounded by the big, awkward offspring that emerges – so different to her other ducklings, and so “ugly” in this difference. Outcast from his duck family, and persecuted by the other barnyard animals, the ugly duckling runs away and passes a miserable winter alone. When the spring finally arrives, he is surprised to find he has matured into a swan – and not only that, all the children who come to the moat to feed the royal swans agree that he is “the most beautiful of the beautiful birds” (Andersen 137).

Andersen’s *The Ugly Duckling* is a founding egg-switch story that invites an exploration of cross-species, non-biological family, while also provoking questions about race, class, and exceptionalism. Implicit in the narrative is a reification of returning to one’s own kind as the ultimate means for acceptance and belonging – although one’s own kind, in this narrative, is not necessarily the same thing as one’s family of origin (a point I will return to). True to humanist tradition the tale might be read as a glorification of an essential inner-self that, through a developmentalist logic of linear growth, emerges coherent and complete in adulthood. It is also, as Maria Tatar has noted, a story of personal transformation that relies upon an illusion of a “natural” hierarchical order of being that pre-exists between “the majestic swans” and “the barnyard rabble” (289).

Andersen, who in his life suggested that the story was autobiographical, writes in the story’s conclusion: “It does not matter that one has been born in the henyard as long as one has lain in a swan’s egg” (137).<sup>5</sup> “[A]esthetic and moral superiority” begins here in the egg as the swan’s genteel “true nature” is assumed *a priori* (Tatar 289). To this end, Jack Zipes points out that “[t]he fine line between

eugenics and racism fades in this story” as the ugly duckling is unveiled as “a tame but noble member of a superior race” (102). Dignity and intrinsic value are linked here to one’s *kind* through a biogenetic rubric that ties genes and ancestry to class, race, and species. Embedded within this discourse is the implication that not all eggs are equal; that one might be born of a *good* egg – a *better* egg – and as such arrive in the world already *exceptional*.

Exceptionalism relies upon a carefully managed maintenance of the illusion that “nature” and “culture” are distinct categories. It is a cultural claim to superiority asserted through discourses that hand-pick and incorporate the “good” parts of so-called nature into culture making the claim appear pre-determined (Riggs and Peel 13). Those positioned to benefit most from this distinction police the perimeters of inclusion/exclusion and notably in *The Ugly Duckling*, it is not the “lowly” barnyard animals that grant the ugly-duckling-turned-swan noble recognition, rather it is the other swans along with the children who come to the castle garden with bread and cake for the royal birds.

*Human* exceptionalism in Western and settler discourses is supported through taxonomies of kin and kind. But kinship practices, as so many contemporary anthropologists have shown, are not simply “natural” (innate, predetermined) occurrences,<sup>6</sup> and indeed, in the context of Euro-American expansion, dominance, and colonization, many argue that kinship is best understood as a “a technology of culture” (Riggs and Peel 4) used to recognise and reify certain white-hetero-reproductive familial assemblages by derealizing other “non-normative” constellations of intimacy and belonging.<sup>7</sup> This othering happens across and between humans, but it is intrinsically tied to all that is deemed “non-human” also. Indigenous scholar Kim TallBear (drawing on Mel Y. Chen’s *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, 2012) notes that the same settler-colonial processes of “de-animation” that grade humans, animals, plants, and other entities in a hierarchical pyramid of greater and lesser value according to their perceived “aliveness,” also subjugates Indigenous peoples and People of Colour as lesser than “the Western and often male subject” (“Caretaking Relations” 25). Put another way, there is a “discursive tie between the colonised, the enslaved, the non-citizen and the animal” (Haraway, “Foreword” xxiv) as the minoritized *Other* is always constructed in relation to (and in support of) the Euro-Enlightenment ideal of rational man.

In this regard, one might find Andersen’s beloved tale illustrative of the workings of nature discourses in broader histories of

colonialism and white supremacy. The Egg-given supremacy granted the ugly duckling, for example, is not dissimilar to the God-given supremacy claimed by colonial expansionists in North America across the nineteenth century – “Manifest Destiny,” for example. It is perhaps no coincidence that Andersen’s fairy tale emerged around the same time that scientific ontologies of human distinction were gaining credibility and influence (Anderson and Perrin 451–452). In the nineteenth century biology, in certain powerful ways, was supplanting God as an anatomical justification for human exceptionalism (451), and Andersen’s egg-switch tale is emblematic of the kind of slippage that occurred (and continues to occur) between the two discourses. To this day, nature, often in the guise of biology, is deployed as the connective tissue between white supremacy and divine right; it is the undercurrent that runs through racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and other lived oppressions, and is weaponized by essentialist rhetoric and dehumanizing practices that work to ensure “the barnyard rabble” (Tatar 289) do not break rank and disrupt the fragile but powerful illusion of a “natural” hierarchical order of being.

The figure of the egg, in Andersen’s *The Ugly Duckling* is incorporated into a humanist narrative to reproduce the idea that exceptional status is a “natural” consequence of ancestral, genealogical, and species-matched kinship. As such it provides a useful entry point into mapping and taking account of power relations that thread between discourses past and present. But Andersen’s egg-switch tale is also layered with generative contradictions, for even as its closure reifies a version of nature in which certain creatures are deemed fairer and therefore more deserving than others, the ambiguous egg at the heart of the matter troubles this familiar and oppressive story. Eggs are not intrinsically “natural,” in so far as the very idea of “nature” is a human-made category that is promiscuous, flexible and contingent – a human and an incubator can hatch other species’ eggs after all, just as a duck can hatch and raise a cygnet. In the second half of this article I return to Andersen’s fairy tale, teasing out the possibility for queer and creative interpretations that complicate prevailing kinship norms toward more inclusive ends.

## Normatively Reproductive Penguins

While nature is the basis for claims to exceptionalism, it also, concurrently, underscores assimilative claims to normativity, particularly through discourses of reproductive family making. Lee Edelman, in his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), puts



forth a polemic vision of *queerness* as a “perverse refusal” (4) of the political and social order of “reproductive futurism” – that is to say, he pits queerness against the narrative of a future that is underwritten by an absolute privileging of heteronormative family values as symbolised by the cultural fetishization of “the child.” Edelman’s anti-social thesis, (whether or not one buys it as an ethical or functional framework for defining *queerness*), outlines a pronatalist and developmentalist norm that exceeds heterosexuality as many LGBTQ people engage in the lived realities of reproductive family making, and correspondingly, as many LGBTQ children’s books are published on the subject.<sup>8</sup>

Richardson and Parnell’s picturebook *And Tango Makes Three*, illustrated by Henry Cole, is one such story, told through the now familiar plot of a gay couple in want of a baby – or, more precisely, of a “gay” penguin couple in want of an *egg*. According to the author’s note, this story is based on the “true” life events of Roy and Silo, two male chinstrap penguins who lived in Central Park Zoo in late 1990s.<sup>9</sup> The book narrates how “[e]very year at the same time, the girl penguins start noticing the boy penguins,” but Roy and Silo, who are “both boys” and who do “everything together” form a different kind of couple. Noticing the penguins engaged in mating rituals and building a nest, their zookeeper, Mr. Gramzay, decides that “they must be in love,” and gives them a fertilized surrogate egg to hatch. When the egg hatches, Roy and Silo become parents to a chick named Tango – “the very first penguin in the zoo to have two daddies.”<sup>10</sup>

Nature is called upon, this time through the anthropomorphized love story of penguins, to grant legitimacy to a human claim that homosexuality (and by extension the homosexual desire to parent) is innate, biological, and pre-determined, that is to say – natural. Perhaps the crowning moment for reproductive futurism within this text is the full-page illustration, viewed from above, of the two adult penguins gazing into an empty nest. This absent-egg tableau is rich with visual, affectual cues that direct the reader toward an understanding that futurity can only be imagined through a desire to reproduce. As Sarah Franklin notes, “it’s not having children but *trying to have them* that is the new normativity and provides a sense of belonging” (238). In this regard it is Roy and Silo’s perceived *desire* to reproduce (more so than the actuality of the offspring that comes), that lays the groundwork for homosexual assimilation into hetero-world norms.

The opening pages of *And Tango Makes Three* set up the premise that this is a book about “families of all kinds” – with “kinds” (as depicted in the corresponding illustration) denoting small human fa-

mily units coded as racially and sexually diverse, always with children. On the following page the zoo animals, who “make families of their own,” are situated within more traditional family discourses:

There are red panda bear families, with mothers and fathers and furry red panda bear cubs. There are monkey dads and monkey moms raising noisy monkey babies. There are toad families, and toucan families, and cotton-top tamarin families too. (Richardson and Parnell)

In the context of this cautiously-diverse-but-mostly-conservative management of family it is perhaps not surprising that *And Tango Makes Three* is at once a bestseller and one of the most banned books for children in the United States.<sup>11</sup> *And Tango Makes Three* has also received criticism from queer and children’s literature scholars for its adherence to homonormativity (Lester; Shimanoff et al.). Roy and Silo, as they are portrayed within the book (and perhaps also as they were revered as celebrities in “real life”), can be neatly incorporated into a “privatized, depoliticized gay culture” (Duggan 179) as exemplary, unthreatening, domestic, and stable, gay family icons. They are shown to be “a little bit different,” but mostly just *the same* as their dyadic, monogamous, reproductive, and heterosexual counterparts.

Assimilation and incorporation into human norms of recognition are what is at stake here. Not for the penguins, who do not give two hoots about human sexual categories and identity politics, but for humans, especially gay humans, who wish to be viewed as part of the “natural” reproductive fabric that undergirds and legitimates Western human kinship. As Noël Sturgeon has noted, this symbolic use of penguins (as representative of nature) to celebrate and fight for LGBTQ rights to marry and parent, is “not a trivial thing” (112) particularly in the United States where the very concept of “natural” is deeply intertwined with the Christian ideal of a traditional heterosexual family, an ideal that is built against and reinforced through an obsessive imagining of an “unnatural” and “deviant” homosexual other. However, biological determinism does nothing to untie binary logics, and indeed reifies a troubling essentialist logic that in other related manifestations (such as gender norms) plays out in limiting and harmful ways. Additionally, a simple and dualistic mapping of homosexuality onto heteronormative logics of family, reinforces and reproduces hegemonic social and economic structures that are steeped in “[t]he assumption that heterosexuality is the only form of sexuality that is biologically reproductive” (Sturgeon 106) while also upholding “racial and national norms” of white ascendancy and citizenship privilege (Puar 30).

While Richardson and Parnell's contemporary picturebook is an egg-switch story of a different variety to Andersen's fairy tale, *the egg* remains the central pivot-point linking nature to discourses of kinship and belonging. Thinking about these two egg-switch stories together, one gets a sense of just how slippery, flexible, contradictory, and leaky the category "nature" is. In the first instance, in *The Ugly Duckling*, nature is employed to support a humanist ideology of exceptional kind through essentialist discourses of species and race, while, in the second instance, in *And Tango Makes Three*, nature is called upon to reinforce an assimilative claim to normative status for gay reproductive families. These two claims to nature – exceptionalism and normativity – seem at first glance oppositional, but actually work together toward reinforcing a hierarchical order of being in which normative family values constrain mobility along the tethered lines of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and nationality, and so through processes of exclusion give rise to a class of exceptional citizens.

### Odd Kin

As we have seen thus far, humanist notions of biology, origin, and species are often reified through the figure of the egg in children's stories about belonging and family, and yet, in these same stories the egg, paradoxically, is often the most salient material-discursive site for troubling biological essentialisms. In this second half of my article, I move from asking *why* and *how* the egg-switch trope is caught up in natureculture discourses of kinship and belonging, and concern myself more with the subversive and transformative possibilities of wondering *what if* this trope might be read toward alternate understandings of kinship and kin-making? This speculative approach is not a separate project to my earlier critical interpretations, rather it takes seriously the non-neutrality of reading practices (Greteman 48), and the reparative and affirmative potential that can come from deliberately positioning oneself to read imaginatively (and sometimes perversely) toward a more capacious view of what is, or may yet be, possible.

Emily Gravett's 2008 picturebook, *The Odd Egg*, is a pleasurable disruptive text that opens fresh and subversive interpretive possibilities for thinking about the egg-switch trope. It is a playful take that pays homage to Andersen's *The Ugly Duckling* while also inviting a generative conversation with *And Tango Makes Three*. Unlike Roy and Silo's story, however, *The Odd Egg* is neither based on a "true"

story, nor is it making any claims about the lives and relationships of actual animals. And unlike Andersen's classic fairy tale, this story is not so much concerned with the life and growth of the hatchling, as it is with playfully putting pressure on the familiar trope of an unhatched, mystery egg.

With delicate pencil and water colour illustrations contrasted against creamy white pages, *The Odd Egg* opens with a double spread. On the left are all the birds who have each laid an egg – a robin, chicken, parrot, flamingo, and owl – and on the right is Duck, alone with a leg in the air as he peers below looking for *his* egg. Notably, even before we meet the titular odd egg, we are introduced to the repro-narrative of a duck (with *he* pronouns) who wants an egg, a plot that resonates with Roy and Silo's "empty nest" story. With no Mr. Gramzay arranging surrogacy, Duck finds himself an egg, and proudly rolls it across the page, thinking it to be "the most beautiful egg in the whole wide world." Duck's egg, true to the original Ugly Duckling story, is large and odd looking, it is also embellished with green spots. In a display of scorn reminiscent of Andersen's barnyard persecution the other birds dismiss the egg: "It'll never hatch!" says the robin; "Not pretty" quips the parrot. One by one, in a series of tiered, vertically cut pages, the bird eggs hatch in species-matched fashion – the robin egg produces a baby robin, the chicken egg produces a fluffy chick, the owl egg produces a (mathematical genius) owlet ... and so on. Just as in Andersen's fairy tale the large, odd looking egg is the last to hatch. Duck waits, leaning against his egg, patiently knitting. Finally, "Creak Crack" – *page turn* – a large baby crocodile bursts forth with a "SNAP". Feathers fly as the sceptical birds and their chicks disappear in all directions off the page and Duck looks on with pride. On the final endpaper we see the large crocodile hatchling in knitted booties and a scarf following along behind Duck, with the word "Mama" over top.

To be sure, this is a picturebook that akin to Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" understands there is "pleasure" to be had in the "confusion of boundaries" (7). Not only is the hatchling not species-matched to Duck, it also enters the world non-innocent fiercely snapping at the other bird nay-sayers, is sizably larger than Duck, and calls Duck – a bird with *he* pronouns who did not lay the egg – *Mama*. As such, *The Odd Egg* engages a rich history and lived reality of queer kinship, in which intimacies are found, made, and chosen in ways that often disarticulate from biogenetic relatedness, gender and sexual binaries, and the limiting shape of nuclear family. *The Odd Egg* embraces "odd kin" (Haraway, *Staying With It* 2), and in many ways, through its

spaciousness of interpretive possibilities, does offer a queer kind of recognition for those of us whose family configurations cannot be pinned down in generic “diverse families” or “LGBTQ” children’s books where the emphasis on assimilation often forecloses other possibilities of non-white, non-monogamous, gender creative, chosen, found, and made kin (Lester; Shimanoff et al.; Taylor).

I suggest, however, that *The Odd Egg* does more than this important work of representation and recognition, opening a reparative door toward reading other texts, like *The Ugly Duckling* and *And Tango Makes Three*, in alternate ways. Taking up naturalized discourses around reproduction, child development, and family, this playful picturebook engages the reader in gently defamiliarizing moves that allow readerly space for imagining kinship otherwise. The reader may (or may not) recognize the egg-trope, will likely take pleasure in anticipating some kind of plot twist (the green spots are a generous clue), but, nevertheless, when the penultimate page is lifted and the baby crocodile leaps forth, there is still a delicious moment of surprise. This surprise works as a powerful epistemological reconfiguration, a moment in which categories and kin are set loose from the domesticating chains of normative social expectation – “all the familiar landmarks of ... thought” (Foucault xvi) – and released to the wilds.

## Matter and Meaning

Hegemonic ideas of *species* and *origin* are cornerstones in discourses of Western kinship; these are the “inherited boxes” (Haraway, “Companion Species” 124) of humanism, the “truths” anchoring settler-colonial projects of power and domestication. In Andersen’s *The Ugly Duckling* and in Richardson and Parnell’s *And Tango Makes Three* the trope of the switched egg does double-duty, at once reinforcing “inherited boxes” of *species* and *origin*, while also containing the radical seeds and subversive surprises that invite a reader to seek out alternative ways for understanding and doing kinship. Just as in Gravett’s picturebook *The Odd Egg*, the egg in these two children’s texts is the key to playfully and critically peeling back the shell of familiarity, revealing worlds of entangled matter and meaning at the heart of the story.

This question, *What if?* extends, queers, and counters the dominant narrative of *species* as an “ontologically real” and “morally prior” (McWhortor 76) system of categorization. In Andersen’s fairy tale, there is a telling moment when the mother duck wonders if the large

and freshly hatched Ugly Duckling might be a turkey. To settle matters she enacts her own classificatory process of sink or swim, and orders him along with her other offspring into the water where he turns out to be a fine swimmer, to which the mother duck concludes, “[h]e is no turkey...he is my own child” (131). *What if*, the text asks, (in resonance with Foucault in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, 1970) we were to order the “wild profusion of existing things” (xvi) in other ways, perhaps even according to the arbitrary taxonomy of *who can swim*? This deceptively simple (and slightly absurd if you are not a duck) proposition ruptures the hardened link between dominant notions of species and genetic gene pools, and in so doing breaks with a history of race hygiene and eugenics movements that have shaped and dominated Western systems of categorical thought.

In the closure of *The Ugly Duckling* we are left with a sense that belonging and acceptance is ultimately gained by sticking to one’s own “kind.” Despite this, Andersen’s story maintains ambiguity around notions of *origin* in ways that generatively undercut and complicate a purely essentialist and biogenetic reading of kin and kind. The text is haunted by the unanswerable question: *Where did the fertilized egg come from*? One might wonder, then, if the mother duck (whose body and nest incubated the fertilized egg) is the Ugly Duckling’s *family of origin*? Or is *origin* a term we should reserve for the anonymous swan that laid the egg and passed on some genetic material in the first place? And further to this, who or what had a hand in getting the swan’s egg to the duck’s nest? Was it the gestational swan, a downhill roll, a meddling human, or an act of God? This leads to the larger question: To what extent is this happenstance a “natural” occurrence and to what extent is it a bird’s eye engagement with what modern humans call Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART)? Inevitably there are no straightforward answers to these questions, except to say that the material and discursive worlds of born-made, nature-culture, are never so far apart as we have often been led to believe.

In *And Tango Makes Three* assisted reproduction is front and center throughout the narrative, captured pictorially in a full page close-up of Mr. Gramzay’s hands placing the surrogate egg into Roy and Silo’s nest. The text works to show that queer family models and reproductive methods (including ART) are as natural and moral as heterosexual family making, but in the process reinforces a strict nature/culture dichotomy between penguins and humans. Penguins, we are implicitly told, are blank slates for human stories about human sexuality. This is an overly familiar narrative that supports and

naturalizes human exceptionalism, for as Stacy Alaimo reminds us “[n]onhuman animals are also cultural creatures, with their own complex systems of (often nonreproductive) sex” (57). *What if* we were to step out from the great shadow of this “narrow evolutionary narrative of progress” (Alaimo 57), and dwell in the complexity of what is a cross-species, *naturalcultural* story? If we push past human culture wars and identity politics (as important as these may be) might we find the page to be thick with human-penguin encounters, histories, and unfolding stories of becoming together? How might we implicate ourselves as non-innocent players within these stories? Outside of the narrow lens of human reproduction and nuclear family, beyond our human ken, eliding the categorical separation of “sexuality” from all other aspects of being, what myriad ways might intimacy and “courtship” (regardless of genitals) be part of the *cultural* life of penguins? Can we remain curious about penguin rituals of care and companionship without absorbing their story into our own?

“Stories are part of the world,” writes extinction studies philosopher Thom van Dooren, “and so they participate in its becoming” (10). Stories live and grow in the space between the teller and the receiver, and so as we read stories we are caught up in the dynamic work of shaping the world. Children’s stories are not innocent. It is a strategic and perhaps even radical act to take up children’s texts containing oppressive ideologies of kinship, and to find within these texts the transformative seeds for calling in alternative ways of knowing and relating. To read this way is to affirmatively account for and un-map from White supremacist, patriarchal, heterosexual, and anthropocentric understandings of love, family, and belonging. It is to take an “embodied, embedded, relational and affective” (Braidotti 466) readerly stance that is oriented toward a world in which storied realities are rich with a plurality of diverse kinships and kin-making possibilities.

As we see in Emily Gravett’s *The Odd Egg*, opening up the terms *origin* and *species* to a slew of meanings can denaturalize the grand-narrative of God-given/Egg-given supremacy, taking away its monolithic power and allowing, instead, for heterogeneous emergences of other situated, contingent, and queer interpretations of the text. From this reading position one might turn to Andersen’s *The Ugly Duckling*, and through a trans framework find the swan’s beauty to resonate with the lived experience of being recognized for one’s true gender identity,<sup>12</sup> while a different queer allegorical reading of the same fairy tale might focus on the embedded narrative of growing up to find one’s “flock” as a way of valuing chosen kin

over the family one was born in to.<sup>13</sup> In Richardson and Parnell's *And Tango Makes Three*, as we read beyond the surface text of LGBTQ rights and anthropomorphized representation, we are unlearning the language of human exceptionalism and leaning into the possibility that there are other ways to be in good relation with human and more-than-human others, ways that require us to let go of hardened divisions between nature and culture. "Human nature," as Anna L. Tsing has suggested, "is an interspecies relationship" (144). This is not a new idea, of course, and many Indigenous peoples around the world practice and theorise more-than-human relational kinship in situated, resilient, and radical ways.<sup>14</sup> The rest of us would do well to recognize how implicated we always already are in hi/stories of incorporation and assimilation, colonization, capture and domestication, while also being entangled in relational cross-species hi/stories of reciprocal care and becoming. To lean into this embodied knowing is to shake off the inherited myth of bounded individualism and to take up other stories to live by, stories rooted in response-ability to the other. Children's literature is one place we can reckon with stories of kin and kind – unnesting dominant narratives while also affirming kinship as a messy verb capacious enough for all the queer entanglements, odd eggs, and chosen families of this shared world ... and the world to come.

*Biographical information: Kathleen Forrester is a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University (Canada) where she researches kinship in children's literature through a queer ecologies framework. She also has a Master of Arts in Children's Literature from the University of British Columbia. Kathleen has journal articles published in the academic journals Jeunesse and Bookbird and is working on a middle grade novel exploring queer family, memory, and storytelling.*

## Works Cited

Alaimo, Stacy. "Eluding Capture: The Science, Culture, and Pleasure of 'Queer' Animals." *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, Indiana University Press, 2010, pp. 51-72.

Andersen, Hans Christian. "The Ugly Duckling." *Folk & Fairy Tales: Concise Edition*, 4th ed., edited by Martin Hallett and Barbara Karasek. Translated by Erik Haugaard. Broadview Press, 2011, pp. 130-137.



- Anderson, Kay, and Colin Perrin. "'Removed from Nature': The Modern Idea of Human Exceptionality." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2018, pp. 447–472, [doi.org/10.1215/22011919-7156827](https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-7156827).
- Braidotti, Rosi. "A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 36, no. 6, 2019, pp. 31–61, [doi.org/10.1177/0263276418771486](https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418771486).
- Carle, Eric. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. World Publishing Company, 1969.
- Chen, Mel Y. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Duke University Press, 2012.
- Duggan, Lisa. "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism." *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, edited by Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson, Duke University Press, 2002, pp. 175–194.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke University Press, 2004.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Pantheon Books, 1970.
- Franklin, Sarah. *Biological Relatives: IFV, Stem Cells, and the Future of Kinship*. Duke University Press, 2013.
- Gravett, Emily. *The Odd Egg*. Simon and Schuster, 2008.
- Greteman, Adam J. *Sexualities and Genders in Education Towards Queer Thriving*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Haraway, Donna J. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Manifestly Haraway*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pp. 3–90.
- . "The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness." *Manifestly Haraway*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pp. 91–198.
- . "Foreword: Companion Species, Mis-recognition, and Queer Worlding." *Queering the Non/Human*, edited by Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird, Ashgate, 2008, pp. xxiii–xxvi.
- . *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Hurley, Nat. "Reproduction/Non-Reproduction." *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2015, pp. 148–161.

Jaques, Zoe. *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg*. Routledge, 2015.

Justice, Daniel Heath. *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018.

Lester, Jasmine. "Homonormativity in Children's Literature: An Intersectional Analysis of Queer-Themed Picture Books." *Journal of LGBT Youth*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2014, pp. 244–275, [doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2013.879465](https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2013.879465).

McWhortor, Ladelle. "Enemy of the Species." *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, Indiana University Press, 2010, pp. 73–101.

Meyer, Manulani Aluli. "Holographic Epistemology: Native Common Sense." *China Media Research*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2013, pp. 94–101.

Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Duke University Press, 2007.

Reynolds, Kimberley. *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Richardson, Justin, Peter Parnell, and Henry Cole. *And Tango Makes Three*. Simon & Schuster, 2005.

Riggs, Damien W., and Elizabeth Peel. *Critical Kinship Studies: An Introduction to the Field*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You." *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke University Press, 2003, pp. 123–152.

Shimanoff, Susan B., et al. "Queering the Politics of Lambda Picture Book Finalists: Challenging Creeping Neoliberalism Through Curricular Innovations." *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 59, no. 7, 2012, pp. 1005–1030, [doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2012.699840](https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2012.699840).

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Sturgeon, Noël. "Penguin Family Values: The Nature of Planetary Environmental Reproductive Justice." *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, Indiana University Press, 2010, pp. 102–133.

TallBear, Kim. "Caretaking Relations, Not American Dreaming." *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies*, vol 6, no. 1, Spring 2019, pp. 24-41.

---. "Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family." *Making Kin Not Population*, edited by Adele E. Clarke and Donna Haraway, Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018, pp. 145-164.

Tatar, Maria, editor and translator. *The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed., W.W. Norton, 2002.

Taylor, Nathan. "U.S. Children's Picture Books and the Homonormative Subject." *Journal of LGBT Youth*, vol 9, no. 2, 2012, pp. 136-152, [doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2011.649646](https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2011.649646).

Tsing, Anna L. "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 1, 2012, pp. 141-154.

"The Ugly Duckling." *LGBTI Support Centre*, <http://lgbti.mk/the-ugly-duckling/?lang=en>. Accessed 25 May 2020.

van Dooren, Thom. *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*. Columbia University Press, 2014.

Zipes, Jack. *When Dreams Came True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition*. Routledge, 1999.

## Notes

1 I would like to thank the peer reviewers for generous feedback that helped make this article what it is.

2 I read and analyze Hans Christian Andersen's *Den grimme ælling* via Erik Haugaard's English translation. As such I refer to the fairy tale by its English title, *The Ugly Duckling*, throughout the article.

3 Other egg-switch children's stories include Leo Lionni's *An Extraordinary Egg* (1948), Chih-Yuan Chen's *Guji Guji* (2003), and Kevin Henkes' *Egg* (2017). Interestingly, all of these have a playful reptile/bird take on the egg-switch trope.

4 For Rosi Braidotti, figurations – like Haraway's cyborg – are not metaphors, but "material and semiotic signposts" that help us think through power relations and "ongoing processes of subject-formation" in localized and specific ways (34-35).

5 The autobiographical nature of this fairy tale has been much commented upon. Andersen was born to a poor family, but climbed the social ladder over his lifetime as he became a celebrated writer and received patronage from Denmark's nobility (Zipes 101).

6 Kinship has long been a core field of study in the discipline of Anthropology, with feminist and queer scholars (such as, Janet Carsten, Kath Weston, and Marilyn Strathern) contributing significantly to the paradigm shift, from the 1970s onwards, in which kinship was uprooted from “the natural” and placed squarely in the field of culture.

7 See Kim TallBear’s article “Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family” for detailed insight into the ways that marriage, monogamy, private property, and the nuclear family are explicitly tied to histories of European expansion, colonization, nation building, and the assimilation/erasure of Indigenous peoples.

8 Jasmine Lester, following a 2014 study on 68 LGBT themed picturebooks, reports: the “vast majority” focus on a “[queer] monogamous couple’s ardent desire and unyielding efforts to have and raise a child” (253).

9 Roy and Silo reportedly went on to have other mates, including female mates (Sturgeon 112). This is a part of their story that is not mentioned in Richardson and Parnell’s picturebook with its focus on binary (gay/straight) sexuality and lifelong monogamy.

10 The two picturebooks considered in this article do not have page numbers.

11 *And Tango Makes Three* has been in the American Library Association’s top-ten most banned children’s book list at least eight times since its publication in 2005.

12 For example, the 2018 APT production of the play *The Ugly Duckling* written by Willow Reichard-Flynn and developed in partnership with Bradbury-Sullivan LGBTQ Community Center.

13 For example, “Ugly Ducklings,” a 2006 US campaign against the bullying of LGBTQ youth. See also “The Ugly Duckling,” an anonymous blog post from a Macedonian LGBTI support centre.

14 See Daniel Heath Justice’s book *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (chapter 2 in particular), as well as writing by other Indigenous scholars including, Manulani Meyer, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, and Kim TallBear.