



Book Review

Review of *Trans and Gender Diverse Voices in Libraries*

Derya Hodge, *Western University*

ABSTRACT

Review of Adolpho, K.K., Kreuger, S.G., & McCracken, K. (Eds.) (2023). *Trans and gender diverse voices in libraries*. Sacramento: Library Juice Press. 547 pp.

KEYWORDS

transgender, gender diversity, public libraries, academic libraries, archives

SUGGESTED CITATION

Hodge, D. (2024). Review of *Trans and gender diverse voices in libraries*, by K.K. Adolpho, S.G. Krueger, and K. McCracken (Eds.). *Journal of New Librarianship*, 9(1), 119–124.

<https://doi.org/10.33011/newlibs/15/12>

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



Trans and Gender Diverse Voices in Libraries is a polyphonic collection of personal reflections on the LIS field by non-binary, trans, and gender non-conforming library employees in Canada, the United States, and Australia. Edited by a team of trans and non-binary academics, this volume is perhaps the first-ever collection of its kind published in this field. According to the editors it is intended, first, as a resource for the trans and gender diverse library workers “who are the only one they know of in a department, or a whole institution; for the LIS students who do not know if there is anyone like them in the profession they hope to join; for those lucky enough to be welcomed, those who are surviving as best they can, and those who have been forced out of a field that they loved (pp. 3-4).” For cisgender readers, this volume will not provide an authoritative list of best practices for addressing trans issues in libraries (as if such a list could ever exist), but it still provides a way to do the work necessary to better understand the needs of one’s colleagues and patrons without putting the burden on trans people to take on additional educational duties or to be vulnerable about deeply personal struggles and traumas. As one contributor to this collection argues “writing about trauma... requires an incredible amount of effort for the target of mistreatment to dredge up painful memories, to relive trauma in the body and psyche, and to share those experiences in the open. It’s even more upsetting to know that this is the only way many people will believe them (p. 188).”

It is also important for cisgender readers to keep in mind that, even though this volume is groundbreaking in its scope, the idea that gender diversity is somehow a new phenomenon is a misconception held by too many. Ambient transphobia in the West rooted in colonialism and white supremacy created a situation where the only way for transgender people to avoid incarceration, gender-based violence, workplace discrimination, and housing discrimination was either to “pass” as cisgender: rendering themselves invisible by adopting the prevailing mannerisms and appearance of a typical man or woman of their era or to stay closeted (Boag, 2011, Lobdell, 2012, Stryker, 2017). It is because of trans people who have come before me to fight for our rights, including many of the people who contributed to this collection, that I have been able to carve out a life for myself in the library world as a non-binary person in Canada. Yet, the threat of politicians rolling back the rights trans and gender diverse people have won, the recent terrorist attack on a gender studies class at a nearby university, the death threat made against a colleague, the vandalism of pride symbols in the city where I live, and the recent marches by transphobes opposed to “gender ideology” in schools remind me that despite the gains that trans people have made, there is still much prejudice and systemic inequities to overcome (LeBon, 2023, Moulton, 2023, Shetty, 2023, Tasker, 2023). It reminds me that a collection such as this one is necessary and makes me grateful that others have shared their experiences in this volume.

The 53 essays and personal recollections in *Trans and Gender Diverse Voices in Libraries* are divided into seven thematic sections: Personal Experiences, LIS Education, Public

Libraries, Academic Libraries, Archives and Special Collections, Professional Reflections, and a final short section featuring former library workers titled *Leaving Libraries*.

The section “Personal Experiences” features essays by library workers discussing how they came to understand themselves, their transness, and how this impacted their library careers. Both Lai’s (pp. 17-32) and Cron’s (pp. 35-44) chapters discuss, from a place of personal experience, how white supremacy, ableism, and other forms of structural oppression can compound with transphobia in the workplace. As I am white-passing, these perspectives are necessary for me to absorb and incorporate into my self-advocacy at work to make sure that my efforts consider the needs of all trans people. Another key point that Lai makes in their chapter is why it can be difficult for trans and gender diverse library workers to self-advocate in the workplace due to the mechanics of contemporary transphobia. “Trans and gender diverse folk get accused of being attention-seeking, of being “trenders,”” Lai writes, “It is not that the squeaky wheel will get its grease; rather, it is that a nail that sticks out will get hit (pp. 25-26).” In my own life, there is always a doubt about whether to speak up that creeps into my mind when I am referred to by the wrong pronouns or encounter a microaggression in my personal or professional life; I am often afraid of being perceived as excessively thin-skinned, eccentric, or both.

The “LIS Education” section follows, featuring stories of trans and non-binary students making their way through higher education as MLIS or PhD LIS students. Several themes can be found among the ten chapters in this section: struggles with the transphobia of peers and faculty, difficulties in getting the administration to include preferred names and appropriate gender options in registration, and how because of these things, existing LGBTQ+ inclusion policies on campuses often fall short. Additionally, as a sign of the times in which this volume was written, several contributors discuss how attending “Zoom University” impacted their academic careers. A notable gap in this section, however, is the lack of contributions from trans and non-binary faculty in library schools. There is also a lack of contributions by library technicians reflecting on their education in this section. However, Nault’s chapter (pp. 45-51) in the previous section does discuss this aspect of library education briefly.

The “Public Libraries” section contains stories of coming out at work (pp. 175-180), struggling with the acquisition of transphobic titles (pp. 203-211), and the challenges of being visibly trans in a public-facing role in a public library (pp. 229-232). One story from this section that was especially impactful for me came from Hypatia Jones’s chapter on their experiences working in a public library branch in the United States. “Every single child I spoke to about using queerphobic or transphobic language eventually told me that this language was used against them by an adult in their life,” Jones explains, “This includes one child who eventually asked, very timidly, what would happen if he were transgender. I don’t think he would have felt comfortable enough opening up to me if I hadn’t built trust and respect between us over the years and treated him, and the other library kids, like what they did and who they were was

important (p. 243).” Such an anecdote should remind those in public libraries who are facing demonization, censorship, and defunding because of a campaign by right-wing politicians and media figures, of the urgency with which these pressures should be resisted.

The fourth section of *Trans and Gender Diverse Voices*, “Academic Libraries,” features essays and personal narratives on a variety of topics, including finding one’s best presentation under pressure to abide by cis-heteronormative “professional” standards of dress (pp. 295-307) and how equity censuses on campuses can fail to measure the trans population of a university accurately and respectfully (pp. 309-320). Bauer’s chapter (pp. 267-275) discusses how eleven of the thirteen books featuring “transgender people” as a subject heading, were cataloged in sections relating to sexual orientation rather than gender, showing the obfuscating and misleading effects of cataloging according to the Library of Congress classification system that is reminiscent of Adler’s (2017) monograph on the subject, *Cruising the Library: Perversities in the Organization of Knowledge*.

In the “Archives and Special Collections” section, Faust (pp. 393-402) ties his experience challenging the gender binary with binaries that should be challenged in archival practice: the binary between historian-archivist and librarian-archivist, between the ivory tower and those outside it, and between state control of archives and community control of archives. In Canada, for instance, the premier 2SLGBTQ+ archives in the country, The ArQuives, has maintained a strong independent ethos as a counter-archive to state-run archives. In the 1970s, they refused an offer by the Archives of Ontario to acquire and house their collections and have since been embroiled in legal fights over their collections being seized under the charge of “obscenity,” and being initially refused charitable status in the 1980s with the excuse that their work did not benefit the entire community (Barriault, 2009, pp. 100-103). Forty years later, we are in a political moment where trans people such as Faust, are increasingly joining the workforces of government archival institutions and where these same institutions are also starting to grapple with their role in the erasure of queer people from their descriptive practices and outreach programs. In this new state of affairs where the water has been muddied, perspectives such as the ones found in this section will be beneficial for those involved in archival work, both in state-run and community-run archives.

The “Professional Reflections” section features a chapter by Chaar-Pérez (pp. 437-447) that ties Fobazi Ettarh’s (2018) now-famous concept of “vocational awe” into the experience of self-advocacy while completing an MLIS program as a non-binary trans woman, arguing that this educational setting “requires students (and non-tenure-track faculty) to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of an idealized profession.” Like Lai’s (pp. 17-32) chapter, she also argues a need for intersectionality in approaching the structural inequities facing trans people in libraries. Under the title of “towards a trans-BIPOC critique,” Chaar-Pérez (pp. 442-443) reminds us that we must recognize that in a kyriarchal society such as our own, “Black trans women transfemme folks bear the brunt of exclusion” and that trans liberation will not happen

in a vacuum. Trans folks (myself included) who are privileged along other axes of identity should do their due diligence in reflecting on their beliefs and actions to make sure that our praxis does not further the marginalization of others. The following chapter by Correia (pp. 449-453) features a discussion of how J.K. Rowling became perhaps the loudest, most influential disseminator of transphobic talking points in the English-speaking world and the implications of this in the library world where her books had been so highly admired by children and adults alike.

The final section, “Leaving Libraries” reads like a continuation of the previous section. It is the shortest section in the collection but also a heartbreaking one that demonstrates how the toll of burnout and discrimination can cost someone their job. The chapter by Held (pp. 527-531) includes an account of a non-binary employee at a Christian university in the American South being outed to management by a co-worker and the fallout that resulted from that revelation. Soon after they found themselves written up for various minor infractions including a typo in a monthly report and were soon fired for “poor performance (p. 528).”

In addition to feelings of sadness and outrage, a common thread throughout the collection is the readiness of contributors to contextualize their experiences in the library world with the works of scholars and activists outside LIS from Tim Bergling’s (2001) *Sissyphobia: Gay Men and Effeminate Behavior* to C. Riley Snorton’s (2017) *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Such references may serve as avenues for the uninitiated in LIS to further explore the literature surrounding trans issues more broadly in society.

Perhaps in a future collection of essays by trans library workers, the inclusion of more contributors from outside North America would make that volume more relevant to a worldwide LIS audience. Regardless, I am glad that this groundbreaking collection was put together and I sincerely hope that a collection of essays will inspire others to take action to rectify the inequities in our field. I hope that it leaves all its readers with the impression that any emancipatory effort, any progressive movement to make libraries a safer, more valuable, and more equitable place for our colleagues and patrons must include efforts to improve the status of trans people in our society. Trans people must be taken into consideration in any effort to dismantle systemic racism, combat ableism, decolonize, and indigenize our institutions.

It is in the spirit of this intersectional ethos that I must include, like many of the authors in this collection, an acknowledgement of the land upon which I had the opportunity to write this review as a co-op intern at Queen’s University: the territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabek. Despite being an uninvited guest on these lands, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to live, to work to better the community of which I am a part, and to spend time with loved ones here. In the words of one contributor to this collection, Simone (p. 505): “there is neither liberation nor revolution outside of decolonization. All liberatory efforts must be done in solidarity with those whose lands you have settled on.”

References

- Adler, M. (2017). *Cruising the library: perversities in the organization of knowledge* (First edition.). Fordham University Press.
- Boag, P. (2011). *Re-dressing America's frontier past*. University of California Press.
- Adolpho, K.K., Kreuger, S.G., & McCracken, K. (Eds.) (2023). *Trans and gender diverse voices in libraries*. Sacramento: Library Juice Press.
- Barriault, M. (2009). Archiving the queer and queering the archives: A case study of the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA). In J.A. Bastian, & B. Alexander (Eds.), *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory* (pp. 97-108). Facet Publishing.
- Bergling, Tim. (2001). *Sissyphobia: Gay men and effeminate behavior*. Southern Tier Editions.
- Ettarh, F. (2018, January 10). Vocational awe and librarianship: The lies we tell ourselves. In the *Library with The Lead Pipe*.
<https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>
- LeBel, J. (2023, September 20th). Anti-trans rallies met with counter-protests across Ontario. *Global News*. Retrieved Dec. 7th, 2023. <https://globalnews.ca/news/9973504/anti-trans-rallies-met-with-counter-protests-across-ontario/>
- Lobdell, B.L. (2012). 'A strange sort of being:' the transgender life of Lucy Ann/Joseph Israel Lobdell, 1829-1912. MacFarland & Company.
- Moulton, J. (2023, October 3rd). 'Outrage': Vandals target rainbow crosswalk in London's Wortley Village. *London Free Press*. Retrieved Dec. 7th, 2023.
<https://lfpres.com/news/local-news/outrage-vandals-target-rainbow-crosswalk-in-londons-wortley-village>
- Shetty, A. (2023, August 25th). Accused in Waterloo stabbings charged with attempted murder, added to other counts. *CBC News*. Retrieved Dec. 7th, 2023.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/stabbing-incident-university-waterloo-attempt-murder-1.6947981>
- Snorton, C. R. (2017). *Black on both sides: a racial history of trans identity*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Stryker, S. (2017). *Transgender history: the roots of today's revolution* (Second edition.). Seal Press.
- Tasker, J.P. (2023, September 9th). Conservatives approve policies to limit transgender health care for minors, end race-based hiring. *CBC News*. Retrieved Dec. 7th, 2023.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/conservative-policy-convention-transgender-1.69619>