

Immaterial, Emotional, Undervalued: Interrogating the Subjugation of Trans and Gender Diverse Labour in Libraries

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ABSTRACT: While there is some existing scholarship on serving trans/gender diverse patrons in libraries, the labour of trans/gender diverse library workers has received little examination. Until the publication of *Trans and Gender Diverse Voices in Libraries*, the experiences of workers had gone virtually unexamined. This article critically interrogates the ways that libraries fail and inflict administrative violence against trans/gender diverse workers; the implied requirements for trans/gender diverse workers to assimilate and perform additional emotional labour; the ways that the neoliberal library practices social reproduction; and the impact that these factors have on the trans/gender diverse library worker.

Keywords: trans labour, autonomist Marxism, social reproduction, library labour, emotional labour, immaterial labour, gender diverse labour, administrative violence



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A Statement on Scope and Positionality

My Positionality

I come at this article from a very particular positionality that has an indelible impact on what, and how, I write and think. I am a white settler, neurodivergent, transmasculine, agender, queer, and have multiple invisible disabilities. I live and work on the stolen land of the Huron-Wendat, the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Seneca. I was raised in a middle-class household. Though I started as a library technician and have worked in public and special libraries, I currently hold a pre-permanent status academic appointment within an academic library. All these components of my positionality impact how I am perceived and treated, as well as how I navigate and operate, within this field.

Article Focus

I attempt to tackle a lot of ground in this article vis a vis how trans/gender diverse workers interact with, are exploited by, and assimilated into their institutions. The purpose of this article is not to examine the experiences of trans/gender diverse patrons in libraries, though I will touch on the intersections between treatment of patrons and workers. While there is still more research to be done on this topic, it has been covered by other scholarship (Jennings, 2017; Spencer et al., 2017; Taylor, 2002; Wilson, 2018; Smith-Borne, 2019; Naidoo, 2018; Lyttan & Laloo, 2020; Huttunen et al, 2020; Austin, 2019; Drake & Bielefield, 2017; Jardine, 2013). The purpose of this piece is not to provide recommendations on specific actions or initiatives that could be undertaken by information organizations to address or remediate their oppressive and assimilationist structures, though I do provide some basic guidance in the conclusion. Adolpho & Krueger (2024) provide a detailed literature review on the current scholarship related to the inclusion of trans/gender diverse people in libraries and the proliferation of “trans 101” literature.

Library Types and Geographic Scope

This article focuses almost exclusively on the experiences and conditions of trans/gender diverse workers in what is currently referred to as the United States and Canada and ultimately comes from a perspective that is distinctly western. This is the context in which I live and work and I am not well positioned to speak on the experiences of gender diverse workers in other cultures and/or nations. While I will be talking about information organizations relatively broadly, I am coming from the context of academic libraries and will, at times, speak specifically to academic structures.

Terminology

Throughout this piece, I will use the umbrella term “trans/gender diverse” to refer to a relatively wide array of gender identities that exist outside of western, colonial conceptions of cisgender men and women. At times I will refer to particular groups (e.g., non-binary people, trans women, etc.) when the discussion is specific to them. I will also refer to “library workers” broadly. I will also be referring to library administrations and administrators broadly. As contended by Hardt & Negri (1990), while administrative employees are workers, they collectively create an apparatus that subjugates and exploits the labour of their fellow workers and I will be analyzing the power differentials between workers and administrations using this lens.

View on Labour

I acknowledge that there are significant differences and power dynamics between librarians, technicians, assistants, pages, student workers, specialists, and library management. I will not be exploring these dynamics in depth, outside of the power dynamics between management and employees. It is important to position how I view labour and the working class. While the relatively nascent term “professional/managerial class” can be useful in certain contexts, it is not a distinction I will be using here. I problematize this separation along the same lines as the Autonomists. As Popowich (2019) contends; “capital responds to unified working-class resistance by dissolving or decomposing the working class into fragmented, isolated individuals or groups” (p. 154). I instead examine the working class and labour through a Marxist lens; that being the difference between those that must sell their labour vs. their employing institutions and those that wield institutional power, as defined by Marxist Autonomists.

Introduction

Under capitalism and neoliberalism, the trans/gender diverse worker is expected, if not required, to assimilate into the hetero- and cis-normative library via their administrations. Marginalization faced by trans/gender diverse library workers is framed as an individual problem and the worker as either a victim of society or a suspect non-subject to be treated with, at most, tolerance if not outright derision. These social relations are seen as inherently “natural, unavoidable, and inevitable” (Popowich, 2019, p. 166) and we are encouraged to view these dynamics as “a private realm of self-transformation and individual freedom” (Weiss, 2015, p. 85). Libraries avoid their own culpability as agents of social reproduction and as perpetrators of structural and systemic transphobia and cis-normativity. The policies, procedures, and culture of libraries contribute to the marginalization of trans/gender diverse people, including patrons, and the subjugation of trans/gender diverse labour. As Birdsall (2000) observes, the field’s professed neutrality is weaponized by libraries as a way of avoiding politics and thus evading culpability. The invisible and mundane nature of the “daily administration of programs, policies, and institutions” allows the library to diffuse power and apply ineffective reforms that are – more often than not – toothless and performative in nature (Spade, 2015, p. 73). Under this framework, trans “inclusion” is an inevitably failing project.

This article uses the methods identified by Gleeson & O’Rourke (2021), namely a combination of statistics, Marxist literature, critical theory, and testimony from trans/gender diverse library workers to critically interrogate the systemic and reified marginalization that libraries inflict on trans/gender diverse workers. At times this will include my own experiences as a trans librarian. The testimony of trans/gender diverse library workers is referenced from published journal articles and book chapters and focuses on their experiences within the field. These workers hail from public libraries, special libraries, academic libraries, and archives. Much of what has been written by trans/gender diverse library workers about their workplace experiences is in the volume *Trans and Gender Diverse Voices in Libraries* (2023) and this article relies heavily on the experiences described therewithin. Where applicable, descriptions of trans/gender diverse library workers’ experiences in other research or publications are included such as in Brilmyer et al.’s (2024) research on the experiences of archival workers with disabilities or Jones et al.’s (2019) Q&A style article on their work experiences in libraries. Not every published, personal experience could be included in this article and workplace experiences vary for trans/gender

diverse workers. The sources included are those that reflect, or exemplify, wider observed trends. No original interviews were conducted as part of this research.

The testimony from trans/gender diverse library workers in this article include reports of feeling unsupported, unsafe, tokenized, marginalized, targeted, and harassed by their colleagues and administrations. Further, they describe the ways that the actions and inaction of their institutions result in burnout, fatigue, distrust, mental distress, and exacerbation of chronic illnesses. Throughout this article I will demonstrate the proliferation of these conditions and their impact on workers. More specifically, I will be examining the ways that libraries fail and inflict administrative violence against trans/gender diverse workers; the implied requirements for trans/gender diverse workers to assimilate and perform additional emotional labour; the ways that the neoliberal library practices social reproduction; and the impact that these factors have on the trans/gender diverse library worker. Libraries' existing – or sometimes non-existent – policies, procedures, training, culture, technical systems, work expectations, and tokenization all present avenues for systematic transphobia. By examining the ways that this plays out for trans/gender diverse workers, both individually and broadly, I aim to hold library administrations to account for their complicity in reproducing transphobia in the workplace and marginalizing trans/gender diverse workers in the process.

Social Reproduction and Assimilation

Under capitalism, trans/gender diverse workers operate within a larger social and political context where their labour is exploited and subjugated by their administrations. Social reproduction, as defined by Marx, necessitates that workers be “absolutely available for the different kinds of labour required of [them]” (Marx, 1867/1976, p. 618). Marx also acknowledged that workers, collectively, are made up of people from disparate demographics and that rather than developing as people, capitalism creates a system that “works in the opposite direction, and becomes a pestiferous source of corruption and slavery, since here the worker exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the worker” (p. 621). This creates an environment where citizenship within a society is entirely predicated on the ability to sell one's labour and to subordinate oneself entirely as part of this process. Cover argues that this type of citizenship “[relegates] dissidence, nonconforming, and unemployment to noncitizenship and nonbelonging - the nonsubject” (p. 304). The trans/gender diverse worker historically has operated as a nonsubject and, increasingly, is only incorporated under what Cover refers to as a “charter of citizenship” by aligning and assimilating themselves under the dominant social order. Irving (2008) observes that trans/gender diverse activism has “[emphasized] the normative potential of transsexuality” (p. 54) through the positioning of trans/gender diverse workers as economically productive through a “socioeconomic framework that invokes a model productive citizen” (p. 50). This assimilationist avenue to citizenship results in alienation for the trans/gender diverse worker and a denial of their authentic personhood outside of their ability to be productive. Griffiths (2021) writes:

[...] alienated from the means to sustain yourself, you instead find yourself forced to submit to contortions and deformations demanded of you by employers on the labour market. Equally universal are decisions to modify your style, affect, and self-segmentation. These bargains are struck in an effort to resist some of that violence – or at least partially mitigate and avoid its worst assaults (p. 135).

In this way the trans/gender diverse worker is required to assimilate themselves into a hegemonic gender system to gain employment or remain employed. O'Brien (2021) echoes this sentiment and affirms the relation between class and gender diversity for workers. They state "under the tyranny of employers, all workers face day-to-day gendered expectations that constrain how we are able to embody and express our genders. [...] the opportunity for trans people to transition or find employment in the first place, are constrained as one feature of this broader regime of class rule" (p. 58). The, as Griffiths calls them, contortions required of trans/gender diverse workers is not purely theoretical. Baboolall's survey found that half of trans respondents felt that "they could not be their full selves" when applying for jobs, compared to only a third of cisgender people. Because marginalized populations are disenfranchised economically under capitalism as well as socially, the ability to subsume oneself into the gendered hierarchy is still linked with class disparity. The ability to: purchase an entirely new wardrobe, financially access gender affirming care, take time off work when recovering from medical procedures, prove to medical practitioners that you have a "sufficient" support system, can all serve as barriers to trans/gender diverse people that have a desire to medically or socially transition. Some trans/gender diverse workers may also feel the *need* to do one or more of these activities under a transnormativity framework in order to be accepted as legitimate. We can see a form of coercive assimilation play out in some of the reported experiences of trans/gender diverse library workers, particularly through notions of "professionalism."

As contended by Evans (2018) and Ferguson & Dougherty (2022), professionalism is now, and historically, a relatively nebulous concept. Evans notes that "professionalism does not denote status that one is likely to pursue or aspire to; it simply denotes how people 'are', at work" (p. 36). Professionalism codifies certain behaviours, practices, and aesthetics that are gendered and class-based. Professionalism is weaponized as a "discourse that privileges some, disenfranchises others, and provides an unwritten form of organizational control" (Ferguson & Dougherty, p. 5). Under this framework cisgender women, trans/gender diverse people, queer people, Indigenous people, and people of colour are expected to conform to white, western, patriarchal, heteronormative, and cisnormative female or male-coded aesthetics, particularly if they want to take on a leadership or managerial position. Indeed, the perspectives of several trans/gender diverse library workers confirm this. Bieraugel identifies the ambiguity around professionalism for gender diverse people in LIS, they write "there is no real guidance for non-binary trans people on how to dress, how to act, how to 'be professional'" (p. 299). Krahmer (2023), an academic librarian, describes needing to remain closeted and "cross dress" in order to gain and retain employment. Gherl, a public library worker and library school student, notes how they had to question "how much of [their] gender performance was a result of fulfilling social expectations and how much was for [them]" and that working in a library meant putting "any gender exploration on pause so [they] could play the socially acceptable feminine library worker" (p. 120). Williams writes of the "wide cultural divide" between themselves and their colleagues and managers as well as needing to "remain legible" in order to "move onto higher positions" in their library (p. 289). Hogan-Stacey also identifies that their white, cisgender colleagues alienate them and other Indigenous people as gendered normativities are predicated on colonial standards. As Hogan-Stacey illuminates here, marginalization through "professional" aesthetic standards has particular implications for workers with intersecting marginalized identities. Further, the gendered and cisnormative aspect of professionalism has an impact on

those that traverse or transgress gendered aesthetics and expectations. As argued by Watson et al. (2024), this occurs both for trans/gender diverse people that come out or transition at work as well as for trans/gender diverse people whose identities are non-binary or otherwise gender diverse. This is further problematized by Watson et al.'s (2024) description of how the "crossing of gender categories while trying to adhere to binary gender norms, might imply a kind of transnormativity: a particular model of transgenderism that privileges certain trans experiences and diminishes other forms of gender non-conformity" (p. 761). This aspect of gendered expectations impacts many trans/gender diverse people. Trans men and trans women can be expected to conform to hyper specific ideas of what a "man" or "woman" must look, sound, dress, and act like in order to receive respect or validation within the workplace. Inversely, trans/gender people with a variety of other identities may be expected to present as men or women, may be penalized or othered for presenting in manner that does not conform with binary gendered expectations, or even invalidated for not dressing "androgynous" enough to be perceived or accepted as trans/gender diverse. The hegemonic nature of the library profession and the conditions created for trans/gender diverse workers under capitalism can result in workers feeling the need, rightfully or not, to conform to a white, gender normative, colonial, and assimilationist ideal of the "professional".

This need to perform legible aesthetics falls under a wider umbrella of social control within the LIS field. As Spade (2015) argues, the subjugation of trans/gender diverse workers needs to be addressed by changing the way that regimes of power "[manifest] in interconnected, contradictory sites" (p. 4) rather than pointing to a single source of power. Approaching the leadership of a single library, or even of our larger professional associations, is insufficient as the power wielded against many trans/gender diverse library workers is diffuse and informed by both social reproduction and neoliberalism. Under neoliberalism, gender and sexual diversity are only accepted on the terms of the ruling class and only when the subject; 1) assimilates, 2) does nothing to challenge the status quo, and 3) operates under a mode that is financially, politically, and/or reputationally advantageous. This acceptance is more insidious than it may seem. As Barnard (1996) contends, neoliberalism "legitimizes its rule precisely by insisting that it permits oppositional voices and identities to exist" (p. 79). As a field we know that there is a significant disparity between the predominantly white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, neurotypical librarians and the rest of us. The library workforce is currently estimated to be 83-86% white (Kendrick, 2023). Between 2009 and 2017, there was nearly no movement on recruiting and retaining librarians of colour, with an increase of less than 1% (Hulbert & Kendrick, 2023). Librarians with disabilities make up an estimated 3.7-5.9% of the workforce (Oud, 2019), and trans/gender diverse workers are estimated to make up 0.3-3% (Witteveen, 2024; Allard, 2022; Skinner & Hulbert, 2023; Public Library Association, 2021; Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2023; Association of Research Libraries, 2023; Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians CAPAL Advocacy Committee, 2019). Within librarianship, meritocracy positions itself as a method of levelling the playing field despite the unequal and significant life circumstances that must be in place to be considered a viable candidate for employment or promotion. Barriers to access are often class-based, such as being able to afford tuition, move (sometimes multiple times) to work contracts, and/or volunteer to gain experience in the field. Systematic oppression, which has resulted in economic or political disenfranchisement, also serves as a significant barrier, particularly for those that are intersectionally marginalized. Trans/gender diverse library workers that are able to overcome these barriers, or do not

personally face them, are then held up as indicators that their institutions are meritocratic and diverse. This can result in another form of social reproduction where only those that are “successful” at gaining and retaining employment are the same people that face less barriers within society. Trans/gender diverse workers that are Indigenous, racialized, disabled, neurodivergent, and/or transfeminine, are more likely to have their oppression reified in the workplace. It is clear that the performative, neoliberal attempts to address structural inequities in the field are failing; diversity residences, DEI initiatives or committees, milquetoast training, book displays, etc. are all largely ineffective (Morales et al., 2014). Worse, these initiatives are often pointed to as attempts by those in power that they are working to rectify these inequities, without sufficient supporting evidence. Further, in many instances change within the library is only initiated after concerted advocacy from a trans/gender diverse worker/workers. By refusing to initiate substantive change unprompted, library administrations require these trans/gender diverse workers to exert additional emotional and immaterial labour on top of their regular job duties.

Emotional Labour and Immaterial Labour

Trans/gender diverse workers exist within a framework where they are “expected to set aside questions of exploitation or modes of production” and to accept “whatever minor breakthroughs we win [that] pose no threat to the much sturdier relations of exploitation on which society rests” (Gleeson & O’Rourke, p. 7). Emotional, and therefore immaterial, labour becomes a requirement for many trans/gender diverse library workers as they either have to endure a significant emotional or spiritual toll to continue working within the field or to agitate for change while being expected to accept only “minor breakthroughs.” What does this look like in action? Many trans/gender diverse workers have needed to advocate for themselves within their institutions to get names changed on employee records, name tags, email addresses, business cards, and other administrative systems. Oftentimes, institutions are not prepared for these kinds of requests, which requires the individual worker to take an active role in either fighting or shaping policies and procedures. In other cases, the institution only puts policies or training in place as a reaction to a trans/gender diverse employee or colleague. Burnham, an academic library worker, describes gender inclusivity training only being offered after a staff member came out as non-binary and that this had the potential to “single-out or other” their colleague, which may “make colleagues hesitant to come out in a workplace if they think doing so might result in ... an uncomfortable spotlight on them and their identity” (p. 357). In addition, the act of being out at work or visibly trans can result in more emotional labour in and of itself. Gilgan (2023), an academic librarian, describes having gender diverse students reach out to them for support after delivering one-shot instruction sessions, having a cis workshop participant cry over inadvertently misgendering them, and having a faculty member laugh about their discomfort over using pronouns. Ziegler (2023), an academic librarian, describes having trans people “regularly reach out requesting trans resources and information” some of whom were “in crisis and desperate for someone to talk to” (p. 429). These types of experiences demonstrate the additional burden placed on trans/gender diverse library workers to provide emotional support to gender diverse patrons that should be handled by other departments or external organizations and the ways in which cis colleagues place a burden upon their trans/gender diverse counterparts to not only instruct them in basic trans competency but to hold space for their discomfort and transgressions. The privileging of the comfort and safety of cisgender colleagues is echoed by Burnham who describes a gender inclusivity training session where the cis facilitator “clearly didn’t understand a lot about being

trans. In addition to misinformation and misuse of terminology, the approach seemed focused on helping cisgender people feel safe and comfortable working with trans/gender-diverse individuals, rather than creating a working environment that is safe and accommodating for gender diversity and gender-diverse people” (p. 356). Some trans/gender diverse library workers report prioritizing the comfort of cis colleagues and employers, shrinking themselves, staying closeted, or keeping silent as a method of survival (Bowman; Anonymous, 2023b; Hogan-Stacey; Reed). As contended by Sloniowski, performing “gendered and racialized” emotional labour can “damage and exhaust the laborer” (p. 656-657). In this sense, emotional labour can stray into affective labour for the worker, as the bodily impacts and requirements co-exist and proliferate in addition to the mental load required.

This is clearly seen *as labour* by these workers. Anonymous (2023b), a library school student, notes that “I don’t want to do the labor of educating coworkers about my identity or correcting them when they inevitably slip up” (p. 96). Epsten, a library school graduate, writes of “all the extra work you do ... fielding all the inappropriate questions and comments flung at you” (p. 67), and Hunter describes having to “teach my colleagues, bosses, HR, and the union how to treat trans people, and I shouldn’t have to. ... And yet, *someone* has to do this work” (p. 244). The need to educate colleagues and managers and answer inappropriate or uncomfortable questions is repeatedly cited in trans/gender diverse library workers’ experiences (Cal the Saprotroph; Anonymous, 2023b; Heyer; Correia; Epsten, 2023). All of this creates an environment where many trans/gender diverse library workers are *forced to perform emotional labour* regardless of whether they attempt to actively make change within their institutions or not. Emotional labour such as requesting policy changes, providing additional support to trans/gender diverse patrons or community members, or asking for training is far more visible than the invisible emotional labour of enduring their oppressive workplaces where requests are denied; where inappropriate questions are asked of them; or where they are asked to emotionally support colleagues, managers, and patrons that harm them.

While in many ways this particular type of emotional labour is unique to trans/gender diverse workers, it represents a wider trend in the move from, as Popowich argues, manual labour to the exploitation of “immaterial, cognitive, and emotional” labour (p. 153). Within academic libraries, this exploitation takes on a particular tenor. Sloniowski argues that the emotional and affective labour performed by the library worker is rarely acknowledged or valued in the same way that “concrete outputs” are when measuring performance, and that affective labour performed by leadership, such as developing partnerships, is valued more highly than affective labour performed by academic workers (p. 658). Almeida (2020) notes the ways that the “activism” of librarians and faculty “[remains] productive since this additional labour functions to ‘enhance the social, political and media visibility’ of the university” (p. 10-11). Both Almeida (2020) and Spade (2010) articulate how this type of work is only valued as long as it provides no real threat to the administration. Implicating those in the administration, making “too much” noise, making cis colleagues or administrators uncomfortable, pointing out differences, failing to privilege the emotions of cis colleagues or administrators, all of this is seen as a threat to the administration. Any substantive questioning of, or struggle against, the administrative apparatus or power structures in place creates an inherent risk for the worker, despite the institution’s same demand for emotional labour on behalf of the worker to remain and/or appear to be progressive or inclusive. As mentioned previously, these risks can include losing access to promotions and

opportunities, having complaints filed against them, being unfairly reprimanded, being written up for minor infractions, and losing or being forced out of their positions. The prioritization of cis administrators' and colleagues' emotions and comfort can constitute another form of affective labour for trans/gender diverse library workers as the externalization and weaponization of negative emotions towards the worker exists within a “dominant pedagogy of emotion in which violence always finds its ‘appropriate’ object in any audacious and insubordinate refusal ... [that] threatens position and rule” (Worsham, 2001 as cited in Zippin & Brennan, p. 41). Resultantly, many trans/gender diverse library workers are forced to walk a delicate balance of providing immaterial and emotional labour in support of the institution while still ensuring that they effectively assimilate into the institution and not initiate any change or opposition that unsettles cisnormativity, transphobia, transmisogyny, or the individual emotions or comfort of cis colleagues and administrators. Regardless of how successfully a particular trans/gender diverse worker assimilates into their institution, or how little they upset the status quo, the worker is not necessarily protected from other forms of administrative violence that may present itself through a variety of work processes, systems, and/or interpersonal relations.

Institutional Failure and Administrative Violence

Administrative violence, coined by Dean Spade (2015), is a concept that refers to how “the administration of gender norms impacts trans people’s lives and how administrative systems in general are sites of production and implementation of racism, xenophobia, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, and ableism under the guise of neutrality” (p. 73). As Spade contends, gender segregated facilities and systems present more than just an inconvenience to trans/gender diverse workers. They represent a systematized form of, often persistent, humiliation and discomfort that requires significant effort to remedy, counteract, and/or endure. In a separate article, Spade (2010) notes that the logic behind many administrative policies and procedures is ““we shouldn’t have to change how we do things, those rare people for whom our ways don’t work can just individually approach us and tell us how to accommodate them”” (p. 3). This pattern of thinking reveals the larger power dynamics at play between trans/gender diverse people and institutional administrations. Rather than rectifying policies that adversely impact trans/gender diverse people, the problem is either ignored or exceptions are tagged on to existing policies, and only with significant intervention or advocacy from trans/gender diverse workers. At times, policies or administrative barriers are created that *only* apply to trans/gender diverse people, even when the situation at hand is identical. For instance, while changing my legal sex designation at almost every institution I had to fill out — and often notarize at my own expense — a plethora of paperwork. However, when changing my sex marker at one institution the person serving me mistook me as cis, assumed my sex marker had initially been misrecorded, and changed it within a few minutes without requiring any additional paperwork. The stark difference in treatment I received in a situation where I passed as cisgender, and the ease with which the institution rectified the error, was shocking to me. This anecdote exemplifies the ways that administrative systems and policies that approach transness as a difference that needs to be accommodated through a series of additional administrative processes, rather than simply addressing or removing the barriers or oppressive structures that trans/gender diverse people face, reifies the ways that transphobia is enacted by administrative processes and the undue burden and harm this causes to trans/gender diverse people. Interactions with administrative processes where cisgender people are treated preferentially may also cause trans/gender diverse workers to remain closeted, stealth, or otherwise attempt to pass as cis in order to avoid distress or additional emotional

labour.

Libraries are certainly not free of this type of administrative violence and often enact it on trans/gender diverse workers and patrons alike. Adolpho & Krueger (2024) contend: “It can be difficult to imagine future possibilities when so many library workers cannot even go to the restroom or fill out human resources paperwork without being forced to misgender ourselves, and when we must use systems that out and misgender patrons at every step” (Conclusion section, para. 1). Bathrooms are a common site of tension. Chess et al. (2004) note that “bathroom talk is considered politically dangerous, or at least irrelevant, because of a fear that it will be seen as a trivial issue, prompting ¹the mainstream culture to not take us seriously” (p. 193). The trivialization of barriers faced by trans/gender diverse people in libraries has more serious consequences than administrations may realize. Wagner, a cataloger in an academic library, describes a time that they were, very literally, forced by their library to “prove” their gender after a formal complaint was made about their bathroom use by a colleague. This resulted in a formal inquest that they describe as “professionally and emotionally damaging” and “the greatest trial of [their] career” (p. 389). Integrated library systems (ILS) routinely collect data on patron’s genders (though this practice has been removed by some library systems) as well as through employment applications and human resource forms. Similarly, the use of “legal names” and “preferred names”, if available, in various systems has the opportunity to deadname patrons and workers alike. Even in systems that allow for “preferred names” to be used, workers may not ask every patron if they have a “preferred name”, requiring trans/gender diverse patrons to out themselves in order to avoid being deadnamed while applying for a library card. As a result, the ways around these systems, and the ways these systems are enacted, are often inconsistent. Again, these barriers and inconsistencies have a real world impact. Keralis (2023) posits:

Seeing coworkers routinely assume the gender of patrons can suggest to that employee that this library is not a place where it would be wise to come out. By enforcing the library as a gendered space, library employees tacitly exclude both patrons and coworkers from fully participating in the library community (p. 286).

I have experienced the adverse impacts that these types of administrative apparatuses can inflict. As a graduate student I was nearly ejected from my program by the university’s administration due to my mismatched name and identity documents, which was only rectified after my program director stepped in. This occurred despite the fact that I had filled out paperwork, signed by a lawyer, that the school had implemented specifically for trans students that did not have updated identity documents. More recently, I discovered that I was unable to access my pension information through an online portal because the backend of the system was unable to retrieve records with an “X” gender marker. Why gender markers were even included in the backend of a pension portal is beyond me. These incidents are indicative of the adverse impact of; a) collecting and utilizing unnecessary gendered data and, b) creating specific carve outs for trans/gender diverse people.

Testimony from trans/gender diverse library workers reveal pervasive issues around policies,

¹ The use of the term “preferred names” in this paragraph is in reference to the field name that most systems use, when differentiating between a trans/gender diverse person’s name (or cis person with multiple names) and the name that is on their legal identification.

procedures, training, culture, and administration that result in a variety of microaggressions, harassment, discrimination, and administrative violence. The impact of these institutional failures has led some trans/gender diverse workers to closet themselves, leave their positions, or otherwise suffer grossly within their institutions (Cooke, 2005; Wexelbaum, 2011; Grozelle, 2017). While individual experiences may vary, the following forms of harassment, discrimination and administrative violence are indicative of the work environments trans/gender diverse library workers operate within, including:

- Having complaints filed against them and formal inquest pursued for using the bathroom (Wagner, 2023)
- Microaggressions of any and all varieties, such as being asked “why pronouns matter” (Bieraugel, 2023), being repeatedly and consistently misgendered or deadnamed both publicly and privately (Watson et al. 2023; Jones et al.; Anonymous, 2023a; Anonymous, 2023b; Cantina, 2023; Gherl, 2023; Viola, 2023; Heyer, 2023; Baker, 2023; Walters, 2023; Goodrich, 2023; Hogan-Stacey, 2023; Klein, 2023), being told by a colleague that they would not be seen as female until they had no “trace of facial hair” (Wagner, p. 387), and being asked invasive questions about their bodies or health choices (Walters; Klein).
- Having pronouns banned in email signatures by their institution (Gherl).
- Losing access to promotions and professional opportunities (Baker; Correia, 2023).
- Being told they could not work with youth because of their identity (Baker).
- Being told they could not ask — or being reprimanded when they did ask — coworkers to use their chosen name or pronouns (Baker; Klein).
- Having slurs hurled at them or jokes made about them by patrons or coworkers (Walters; Jones, 2023).
- Receiving targeted harassment and/or bullying from coworkers (Cal the Saprotroph; Watson et al., 2023; Klein).
- Having requests for trans competency training or other institutional supports denied by administration (Cal the Saprotroph; Jones).
- Being outed or deadnamed by their email or other systems run by institutional IT departments (Hunter, 2023; Plante, 2023).
- Being outed to their coworkers, supervisor, and/or human resources (Held; Burnham, 2023; Baboolall et al.).
- Having queer or trans-positive programs and displays challenged, denied, or sabotaged by their institution (Hunter).
- Being written up for minor infractions after their gender identity was revealed (Held; Klein)
- Losing or being forced out of their job due to their gender identity (Held; Klein; Timar-Wilcoth, 2024)

Many trans/gender diverse library workers feel distrustful of their administration and colleagues both within their organizations and the LIS field at large. This distrust can stem from a number of factors, including personal experiences, the general political environment, a perceived mismatch between administration’s words and actions, and/or a lack of policies or procedures in place to handle situations unique to trans/gender diverse workers (e.g. policies/procedures/guidelines around coming out, name changes, medical coverage for transition related expenses, etc.). This distrust can manifest in feelings of alienation or powerlessness, frustration with performative

“allyship” from colleagues and managers, feelings that they have been tokenized, and/or emotional distress. For example, some trans/gender diverse library workers write of how their colleagues and managers having pronouns shared in their email signatures feels like “a slap in the face” when no tangible steps have been taken towards creating a culture or policies and procedures that take trans/gender diverse patrons and workers into account (Gherl, p. 124; Cal the Saprotroph; Held, 2023; Klein). Klein, a public library worker, writes “I didn’t need diversity and inclusion statements or Transgender authors speaking at conferences when I couldn’t even safely use the bathroom” (p. 534). This performative allyship exists within a wider culture, both within individual institutions and in the field at large, that libraries are inclusive and that everyone is welcome within the library “without knowing if that’s actually true, without having asked anyone, and usually without having done much preparation” (Bowman, 2023, p. 284; Held, 2023; Plante). Some trans/gender diverse library workers find their workplaces to either be hypocritical when it comes to trans/gender diverse issues or actively transphobic (Plante; kas, 2023; Gherl). Others see the decisions made by their administrations to be actively harmful to trans/gender diverse people and/or platforming transphobia and hatred towards gender diverse people (Plante; kas). Plante, an academic librarian, writes:

I remember sobbing in my office because anti-trans events kept happening in libraries and universities, and now one was slated to happen at my university. I’d done everything I could behind the scenes to elucidate how utterly fucking deplorable this event was and how it would hurt people I love and care about, how it would hurt me. ... these noxious events are anything but neutral; they normalize, legitimize, and amplify hatred and violence against people with complicated genders, especially racialized trans femmes. Every person with power who deigned to reply to my messages said their hands were tied ... I wondered how I would react the next time I saw [them] (p. 258-259).

Some trans/gender diverse library workers also write of feeling like their libraries “[pretend] they don’t exist”, that their administration sees them as “politically toxic”, or that there is an assumption that trans/gender diverse people are not part of the patron base their institution serves (Gherl, p. 124; Baker, p. 158).

For library workers with intersecting marginalized identities, experiences of transphobia and/or homophobia can, and often do, co-exist with experiences of racism, ableism, fatphobia, sexism, colonialism, and other forms of systemic oppression. Trans/gender diverse library workers with intersecting marginalized identities have experienced having others take credit for their work, being belittled or spoken over, or having their lived experiences and direct action for change appropriated by their administration. Reed, a librarian and archivist, observed this type of behaviour from sus white, cisgender female colleagues as an attempt to “build up [their] career on the backs of those with less power, a form of extraction, and purely capitalistic” (p. 172) as did Vaden (2023), a librarian that has since left the field, when they note “I began to realize that my work and self-advocacy as a Black, trans, disabled person was being used for clout by my administration, rather than to spur the radical changes I hoped for to support our marginalized communities” (p. 210). These experiences expose the lack of systemic change in the LIS field writ large, rather than at individual libraries. Simone (2023), a library school student, writes “the purported dedication of the [ALA] to safety and equity feels the same: it looks good on paper, but the lack of systemic change continues to enable harmful interactions during which those

experiencing harm must pander to those enacting it” (p. 509).

This type of intersectional oppression has real world impacts on library workers, such as having chronic pain flair-ups, panic attacks, or an increased need for stimming or masking as a result of facing transphobia or misgendering, as well as experiencing a decline in mental health due to workplace conditions that are both racist and ableist (Cal the Saprotroph; Vaden, 2023; Green, 2023). Library workers with intersecting marginalized identities can also face increased difficulty discerning, and fighting against, discrimination due to their multi-faceted identities. Hunter, a public librarian, writes of feeling that they could not be too different from their coworkers and that they were aware of their coworkers’ biases against a variety of equity deserving groups. Williams (2023), an academic librarian, writes of realizing that they became fearful of “what my white colleagues are comfortable saying when I’m not in the room” after their coworkers made transphobic comments in front of them, not realizing they were gender diverse themselves. Vaden (2023) writes of being unable to discern whether his treatment at his library was because he was trans, Black, Deaf, or neurodivergent. They also postulate that their intersecting marginalized identities may have made them a target at work. This type of intersectional marginalization echoes my own experience being harassed in the field and the response from a former institution’s administration. Not only was it not always clear which facet of my, and my co-worker’s, intersectional marginalized identities our harasser was targeting, when it was not a combination therein (e.g. racism and misogyny, transphobia and ableism, etc.), but how seriously the administration took our complaints was entirely predicated on their own biases (i.e. taking misogyny more seriously than transphobia). Brilmyer et al.’s (2024) study affirms this dichotomy. One of their participants explicitly cites how being both disabled and trans impacts their experiences within the archival field, such as being unable to discern whether their treatment is because of one or multiple aspects of their identity and feeling that they need to overperform in order to be considered competent. The authors note that this type of intersectional marginalization “inform ... [workers’] experiences in complex, impossible-to-tease-apart ways” and place additional pressure on workers that face multiple “barriers to gaining and keeping employment” (p. 128).

These experiences all speak to the ways that institutions routinely and consistently fail their trans/gender diverse employees. Rather than seeking further reform of administrative systems that harm us, institutions need to rework their policies, procedures, and systems from the ground up to remove barriers whole cloth. As Spade (2015) advocates, “we must be acutely aware of the potential for dividing trans politics along lines of access and capacity to benefit from reforms, and we have to consciously work toward building shared analysis between and amongst trans and nontrans populations struggling against shared obstacles and mechanisms of control” (p. 88). All of the same structural barriers that many trans/gender diverse people experience in society are replicated and reified by libraries. Library administrations have treated us like exceptions, required uncompensated and unrecognized emotional labour, implicitly and explicitly demanded assimilation, undervalued our labour economically and systematically, paid lip service to our marginalization or outright ignored it, and enacted and weaponized administrative violence against us. We are expected to subject ourselves to the demands of our institutions and assimilate into these cultures. We must be “absolutely available” to perform as labourers and through that performance to display an aesthetic and legibility that is inherently gender normative, to stay docile in the face of microaggressions and administrative violence, to assimilate into a wider

culture that does not serve us, and to make any sacrifice required of us to succeed. This is the social reproduction that libraries enact actively, whether consciously or not, every day. We can no longer feign ignorance or pretend that this is not occurring.

Conclusion

We are currently witnessing a rapid deterioration of social and economic conditions and increase in hate crimes and discrimination. Governments are attempting to eradicate trans/gender diverse people from public life via a variety of legislation and policy that limits our ability to: come out safely or use chosen names and pronouns at school; to access gender affirming healthcare; to participate in sports; to have our histories taught in schools; and/or to access and use appropriate government identification. Such legislation has been introduced in New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, Alberta, at the federal level in the U.S., as well as within forty-nine states, most prominently in Texas, Missouri, Iowa, West Virginia, and Oklahoma (Egale, 2023, 2024a, 2024b; Trans Legislation Tracker, n.d.). A proliferation of book ban laws and policies have swept the U.S. and Canada (Villarreal, 2024; Weeks & Lobsinger, 2024; Gauntner & Ross, 2025; Johnson, 2025; Gold, 2024). The proliferation of these types of bills, and the speed at which they are proposed, makes it impossible to cover in full here. EveryLibrary is currently tracking this legislation in the U.S. (EveryLibrary, 2025). We are already witnessing books being removed from shelves, even before any complaints have been lodged; libraries requesting bookstores to not supply them with “controversial” titles; librarians being pressured or instructed to remove books by their administration; new books on or by trans/gender diverse people no longer being purchased; books being removed without following regular review policies or procedures; overcompliance with newly introduced laws, even when such laws are ill-defined or require classifying books that simply contain trans/gender diverse people as “indecent”, “pornographic”, “obscene”, or “indoctrination” (Hixenbaugh; Hellerstein, 2023; Harris, 2022; Legum, 2023; Jensen, 2025; Flandro, 2024; Gold, 2024). The subjugation of our labour currently exists within a wider political context where evidence of our existence is being actively wiped out and suppressed by not just fringe elements and governments, but by collaborationist colleagues and administrators who actively or passively believe that our very existence can be affiliated with obscenity or child endangerment.

It is not possible to decouple material conditions and the current political context from success or wellbeing in the field. Library administrations need to seriously consider how they will work to protect their trans/gender diverse employees, patrons, and collections in an increasingly hostile social and legal environment. By failing to implement policies and procedures, let alone cultural changes, that many trans/gender diverse workers require in order to be treated with a minimum level of dignity and respect, libraries force workers to make a choice. They can either choose to stay silent, closeted, stealth, and/or quietly accept routine microaggressions, harassment, and administrative violence OR put in additional labour – almost always underrecognized, undervalued, and sometimes even unpaid or extracurricular – to shift, revise, augment, or overturn institutional policies, procedures, and systems that diminish, disadvantage, obfuscate, and/or actively harm them. For those that choose the latter, there is also no guarantee that their attempts to make change within the organization will be fruitful and that they will not face further harm, censure, harassment, or lost opportunities within their organization as a result.

Illusory “inclusion” masks what is required of many trans/gender diverse people in the

profession; the assimilation and subjugation of the worker. This subjugation is tied to a larger class struggle that all working class people suffer under, while many of the assimilationist requirements experienced by trans/gender diverse library workers are unique. The neoliberal library prefers to distill the trans/gender diverse experience down to simple identity politics. It is through this process that band-aid solutions and reforms are implemented as only the identity of the worker must be recognized. As Binnie (2015) argues, our identities are not “merely cultural, superfluous and tangential” but exist “at the core of economic, social and political geographies” (p. 152-153). The library does not engage with the ways that marginalized workers' identities directly impact their material conditions, and thus their ability to participate in the field. They do not acknowledge how their social reproduction demands the totality of the worker rather than allowing for the trans/gender diverse worker to express or produce self-realization or autonomy. They do not critically interrogate the ways that their policies, procedures, systems, and culture reify the trans/gender diverse person's place in society as a marginalized non-subject.

It is evident that more tangible solidarity-based action is needed that directly engages with trans/gender diverse library workers. Fellow workers can hold solidarity with trans/gender diverse coworkers in multiple ways. First and foremost, the on-the-ground experiences of trans/gender diverse library workers are often unique from library to library and from person to person. Actively listening to, and engaging with, trans/gender diverse co-workers and advocating for their individualized needs is paramount. It is important that fellow workers reflect on the ways that their interactions with patrons and coworkers may rely on cisnormative, transmisogynist, transnormative, or gendered assumptions. Assuming the gender of patrons when filling out patron records, not inquiring about pronouns when meeting a new coworker, or failing to correct a coworker or administrator when they deadname or misgender a trans/gender diverse coworker are common examples of these assumptions at play. Reorienting approaches to interactions with a gender inclusive lens contributes to creating a healthier work environment. Cisgender coworkers can also take more active supportive steps within their workplaces by holding cisgender colleagues accountable for their transphobia and, as Ness (2024) argues, documenting and serving as a witness for trans/gender diverse colleagues when discriminatory behaviour does occur. Labour unions that represent library workers can advocate for increased coverage for gender affirming care and, when insurance coverage is not possible, finding other avenues to fund gender affirming care such as through health care spending accounts. Union locals should also hold concerted consultations with trans/gender diverse members to ensure that their voices are heard and that their interests are represented during collective agreement negotiations. Employee Resource Groups and union committees can also present an avenue for trans/gender diverse library workers to come together and organize campaigns and advocacy efforts based on their local needs. The Canadian Labour Congress and Canadian Union of Public Employees both provide guides on how unions can better support trans/gender diverse workers (Canadian Labour Congress, 2019).

Library administrations carry the largest burden in rectifying the labour issues currently facing trans/gender diverse library workers. Part of this includes, as Wagner & Crowley note, acknowledging and contending with the idea that “they might never have been inclusive” (p. 178). Administrators should endeavor to audit their library's policies and procedures, to remove barriers when and where applicable, to cease the collection of unnecessary gendered data, and to be proactive in creating a healthy and safe work environment for all workers. Programs and

initiatives related to trans/gender diverse workers and patrons need to be done after consultation, rather than based on assumptions. Administrators need to measure and critically reflect on whether trans/gender diverse workers are part of their staff complement and if they are paid and hold positions commensurate with their education, expertise and level of experience in comparison to their cis coworkers. Considerations may also need to be made about how trans/gender diverse workers fit into hiring initiatives that may apply to cisgender women or other marginalized workers.² Finally, administrations need to evaluate whether their infrastructure and benefits schemes serve their trans/gender diverse employees. Are ungendered washrooms available? Does the insurance plan cover gender affirming care? Is IT prepared for name changes to proliferate across systems? These types of questions should be considered and addressed without requiring advocacy from a trans/gender diverse worker.

Further, concerted research is needed here. While I have conducted a qualitative analysis of workplace experiences based on published testimony and research, original research into trans/gender diverse library workers' experiences is needed. The current statistics available on salaries, job precarity, and employment rates for trans/gender diverse workers is limited. Dedicated research into these workers' material conditions is necessary. While the available statistics on the economic and labour participation rates for trans/gender diverse people in the labour market reflect a wider gamut of trans people, what is available within LIS is dogged by methodological issues. Some surveys collapse trans/gender diverse people with cis LGBTQ+ people, have incongruent categories (e.g. having only 'man', 'woman' and 'transgender'), or only measure non-binary people while ignoring other gender diverse people as well as the disparities between cis women vs trans women and cis men vs trans men. Further, while some surveys may note the statistical insignificance of trans/gender diverse respondents they typically do not acknowledge 1) whether they took any additional measures to ensure they were capturing a proper sample of trans/gender diverse graduates or library workers, including concerted recruitment and 2) that trans/gender diverse people are underrepresented in the field. These issues combined make it difficult to tease apart how trans/gender diverse people are represented within the field and the economic and employment outcomes that result. Researchers, unions, and professional associations need to make deliberate efforts to 1) recruit trans/gender diverse respondents when conducting research, 2) conduct surveys that utilize gender categories that more accurately reflect the terms used by trans/gender diverse people and respect the nuances and inherent differences between different types of gender diverse people, and 3) critically reflect on how gender relates, specifically, to their research, if at all, and whether their methodology and analysis appropriately accounts for trans/gender diverse people in their specific research context.

The current culture and administration of libraries, the slap dash and ad hoc nature of so-called "reforms", harm many trans/gender diverse library workers. The field is actively undervaluing and exploiting our labour, our bodies, our health, our personhood. Trans/gender diverse library workers face increasing attacks by the government, populace, and library administrations. Neoliberal "inclusion" is not enough to combat these attacks. It is imperative that libraries

² I want to clarify here that I am not advocating for trans/gender diverse people to be added to hiring initiatives that are aimed at specific communities, particularly those reserved for Indigenous workers and workers of colour. Rather, that blanket hiring initiatives and those aimed at decreasing gender imbalances should include trans/gender diverse people.

confront how their policies, procedures, and culture result in conditions that not only subjugate trans/gender diverse workers, but workers and patrons at large. It is crucial that libraries and our professional bodies resist and appropriately respond to discriminatory legislation and organized hate groups. It is imperative that they interrogate the ways that they operate as proliferators of class division and social reproduction. Particularly during a period of rising fascism and the scapegoating of trans/gender diverse people as a response to economic disparity and insecurity, the emancipation of trans/gender diverse workers is intrinsically tied to the abolition of class disparity entirely.

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