

Becoming a Trans Ally: Social Justice Work through Libraries and Archives

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Abstract:

This paper will provide an overview of the Transgender Archives (TGA), of which selected materials were on loan to the Queen Elizabeth II Library (Memorial University of Newfoundland) during October 2016, and to the Harriet Irving Library (University of New Brunswick–Fredericton) during March 2017. The TGA, founded by Dr. Aaron Devor, and housed at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, is the largest collection of transgender archival materials in the world.

As an extension of these exhibitions, the libraries engaged with transgender communities in Atlantic Canada. Through this outreach, the intersectionality of trans lives with areas such as healthcare, legal, and government services was evident, and it is a reality that life for transgender people involves navigating these very different, and often bureaucratic and cumbersome, systems.

Working with communities as trans allies, libraries and archives play a major role in providing access to reliable and timely legal and health-related information, and taking a position on social justice issues that divide many jurisdictions, such as the freedom to use the public restroom that corresponds with one's gender identity. The support of transgender culture and resources by libraries and archives is just one way to promote gender inclusiveness, not just in the stacks, but in the wider community.

Keywords: transgender, LGBTQ, outreach, Transgender Archives, libraries.

Introduction

This paper is about my experience working with materials on loan from the Transgender Archives (TGA) at the University of Victoria (UVic), and how this work evolved into promoting the academic library as a trans ally, both on campus and within the community.

The TGA was founded by sociologist Dr. Aaron Devor in 2005 after he successfully negotiated the acquisition of the Rikki Swin Institute holdings, which was a private archive in Chicago devoted to transgender history (Devor, 2016). Rikki Swin, a successful business owner, and trans woman, held many important collections such as: Ari Kane, who was one of the founders of Fantasia Fair, which is an annual conference celebrating gender diversity; Virginia Prince,

the former publisher and editor of *Transvestia*, a ground-breaking publication for crossdressers; and the International Foundation for Gender Education (Devor, 2016). Other prominent acquisitions and donations followed, including the collection of Reed Erickson, founder of the Erickson Educational Foundation, and the collection of Stephanie Castle, founder of the Vancouver-based trans advocacy organization, The Zenith Foundation (Devor, 2016). In 2011, the TGA had its official launch at the Canadian LGBT History conference.

I first encountered the TGA in June 2014 during a tour of academic libraries in Victoria, BC. I was in town attending a library conference, and had signed up for a tour of the McPherson Library at UVic. One stop on the tour was the Archives, which happened to have a small exhibit of some items from the TGA on display at the time. I was struck by the selection of materials in this collection, as there tends to be a lack of representation within archives of LGBTQ-related holdings. Here, trans history was presented, front and center, in a library setting, and it was a powerful experience to witness a history that often is marginalized in society.

Recognizing the lack of LGBTQ holdings in the archives at my own institution at the time, Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN), I reached out to UVic in 2016 to see if it would consider a loan. I have been active in library outreach to diverse user groups, and saw the possibility of organizing an exhibition as a way to support and connect with LGBTQ organizations both on and off campus. Fortunately, both MUN and UVic were supportive, and we coordinated a loan of 67 items from the archive, mostly duplicate publications. This loan was arranged to coincide with the 2016 St. John's Storytelling Festival, which featured trans activist and writer, Ivan Coyote. I served as the curator for the exhibition, which was held at Queen Elizabeth II Library in October 2016, and also helped organize a book reading and signing for Ivan Coyote, who was promoting their new book *Tomboy Survival Guide*.

In December 2016, I accepted a new position at the University of New Brunswick (UNB), and, one of the the first things I did was contact the head of Archives & Special Collections to see if UNB would be interested in hosting the TGA material. Fortunately, there was interest, and UVic graciously agreed to extend the loan. Fortuitously, at the same time, there was a bi-campus initiative between UNB and St. Thomas University to hold the first-ever Queer Research Day (QRD). In addition, an experiential learning course, ARTS 3000, provided the library with an undergraduate student who, not only helped organize the conference, but curated an exhibition of the TGA materials, which was a highlight of the QRD program.

Due to my work with these two projects, which involved the library chiefly because of the TGA loan, I learned a lot about and from the transgender community, and will highlight a few areas where libraries can support and serve as allies.

Collection development

A 2007 assessment of the information needs of transgender communities in Portland, Oregon, found that the top-requested materials are health and legal resources (Beiriger & Jackson). Although libraries should play an important role in providing access to this information, the authors found that, at least in this small sample, libraries are “grossly underutilized as an information resource” and that trans people surveyed primarily use the Internet to look for information (Beiriger & Jackson, 2008, p.52). While using the TGA collection at UVic in 2016, I was struck by something I read in a letter in the Virginia Prince fonds. It was written by a physician and addressed to Virginia, who was, as previously mentioned, a trans activist and publisher of *Transvestia*. The physician wrote “all my education about my dual gendered nature has come from community literature, not from what I found in the medical library.”

(Correspondence from a physician to Virginia Prince, n.d.). I was struck by this statement and it underscored the lack of credible information available at the time to even a medical doctor. This sentiment was contextualized by McEacheron (2016) who stated “I think that it is vital to acknowledge the marginalized voices of those within the LGBTQIA+ community, and to simultaneously acknowledge some of the marginalized information sources within librarianship and academia—such as blogs and magazines—particularly because marginalized voices often speak from marginalized platforms like these.” (McEacheron, 2016, p.185).

For collections librarians, knowledge of the needs of the community, along with selection tools such as bibliographies, book reviews and features such as K.R. Roberto’s “Beyond Caitlyn Jenner” (2016) are crucial in building a strong collection. An excellent resource titled “TRANScending Identities: A Bibliography of Resources on Transgender and Intersex Topics” was compiled for the American Library Association’s GLBT Round Table by Nancy Silverrod of the San Francisco Public Library (2008). Also useful are identifying prominent trans authors such as Jennifer Finney Boylan, Kate Bornstein and Julia Serano, and publishers that specialize in LGBTQ literature such as Arsenal Pulp Press, Seal Press, Topside Press and Transgress Press. Organizations such as the American Library Association and the Lambda Literary organization also sponsor award programs that are excellent places to find books.

As an offshoot of my work with the TGA, I collaborated with a Sociology professor at MUN, Dr. Ailsa Craig, on an annotated bibliography on Transgender Culture and Resources for the ALA publication *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, which will appear in its Summer 2017 issue (Bail & Craig, 2017). We were careful not to duplicate the efforts of Roberto and Silverrod, and included non traditional sources such as databases, video collections and podcasts. These compilations of resources can be useful for drawing awareness to, and promotion of, transgender titles. At my current institution, UNB, I was approached by the Human Rights Officer, who was looking for a list of LGBTQ materials in local libraries. I found some great inspiration from the Fredericton Public Library, which had created a colourful handout on children's LGBTQ books. Other Canadian libraries such as Vancouver Public Library have also created transgender-focused reading and book lists (Smith, 2016).

Community outreach

One of the best parts of becoming involved with the trans community is outreach and meeting with trans people and trans allies. I felt very fortunate to have been invited by one of its chief organizers to the first Trans Needs Summit, held in St. John's in 2016. Those attending the summit ranged from health care providers to government policy makers to students to trans men and women to parents of gender creative children. In other words, a huge cross section of the trans community. While there, it became evident that libraries and archives can play an important role because of the strong need and demand for providers of credible information, programmers of LGBTQ events and preservers of trans history.

Working with the TGA also brought me in contact with student groups such as the Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay & Transgender Resource Centre at MUN, and a group of nursing students who put together a display for a campus health fair titled *Transgender Issues: Equity for All*. Another group in St. John's that I connected with was Parents of Gender Creative Kids, which is a "peer support group for parents of gender-creative, gender-questioning, and transgender children and youth." (Gender Creative Kids Canada, 2015). The popularity of books such as *Raising Ryland* by Hillary Whittington, with Kristine Gasbarre (2015), and *Becoming Nicole* by Amy Ellis Nutt (2015) make it evident that there is a need for transgender education and resources, not just for those who are gender fluid, but for their families and friends.

At UNB, the student organization, Qmunity, meets regularly in the library, which is also home to the office of the Human Rights Officer (HRO), who serves as a mentor to the group and provides guidance regarding legal and ethical matters. This philosophical and physical link between the library and the human rights office is one that brings a lot of pride, as libraries, traditionally, have been strong champions of equitable access and service (ALA, 2008). Crum (2017) captures how important it is to provide equitable services in an interview with Martin Garner, Dean of the Library at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Garner states: “For the trans community, it’s important to find that same kind of welcoming experience...[t]his not only includes having books and other materials representing the breadth of the trans experience, but offering the full range of library services to this community. It can be as simple as putting your preferred pronouns on your name tag or in your email signature.” As an effort to increase LGBT representation at UNB Libraries, we hope to partner with Qmunity on an upcoming promotional brochure project.

Event programming

A lot of outreach efforts occur while planning an event, particularly when it comes to sponsorship and promotion. The logistics of planning and executing a library event are often involved, and require a lot of time and hard work. Thus, it’s to everyone’s benefit to work together, and partner up to plan and create dynamic and innovative programming. As mentioned, one of the cultural activities I helped coordinate was a reading and book signing at the Queen Elizabeth II Library for award-winning trans writer Ivan Coyote, who was in St. John’s as a headliner for its annual Storytelling Festival. Representing the library, I worked with Ivan, the organizers of the festival, and the Chair of the Sociology Department, to plan the reading and serve as a co-host. Because Ivan planned to sell their books at the reading, I liaised with the MUN campus bookstore, as well (university policy mandates that any books present at events must be sold through the campus bookstore).

At the Harriet Irving Library, the previously-mentioned conference, Queer Research Day, brought together students and faculty to share their work on LGBTQ issues and themes. Along with the Faculty of Arts, the Library was a proud co-host and sponsor of the event. UNB Libraries assisted in the day’s activities by providing library space for the closing keynote talk and the evening reception, hosting the TGA exhibition, presenting on the topic of libraries as social activists, and supporting the conference sessions by library representation.

Programming is not just limited to adults. There are even programs emerging that explore gender fluidity with young children, such as the Read by Queens (and Kings) program at the Winnipeg Public Library, where stories are read by drag queens and kings, along with crafts and games (CBC News, 2017). This program is part of a wave of new family-friendly queer programming, inspired by Drag Queen Story Hour, which was created by Michelle Tea and RADAR Productions to celebrate the lack of rigid gender constraints in young children and to promote positive role models (Drag Queen Story Hour, 2017).

Social activism and policy development

As transgender rights grow, and awareness increases, there are, unfortunately, some groups that are not supportive. Some of these groups have even initiated policies and laws that do not recognize, and even openly discriminate against the rights of trans men and women. One area where many of these battles are being waged is public restrooms. Julia Pyatetsky (2016) states in “Do Not Go Gentle into That Gender Neutral Bathroom”: “It goes beyond designating a single bathroom as gender neutral, which only keeps the issue as separate but equal. This is a

civil rights issue, and libraries are at the forefront of making positive change happen.” Thus, a library patron who is transgender should be free to use the restroom that aligns with his or her gender. To encourage this feeling of belonging, the Vancouver Public Library includes the statement “Trans People Welcome” on its public restrooms (Smith, 2016).

At UNB Libraries, frontline public services staff provide, when asked where the restrooms are, directions for both genders, as the rooms are located on different sides of the building. In addition, there are 2 gender-neutral and accessible bathrooms within the main library. The Human Rights Office at UNB provides gender awareness training, which I hope to incorporate here for both frontline library staff and student assistants. At MUN, I took part in a Gender Diversity workshop, which was highly useful and instructive for the information it provided on pronoun usage and trans language.

Currently, UNB is in the process of creating a preferred name policy. The library was approached by the Office of the Registrar to assist the work of the Preferred Name/Gender Identify working group, and identify any areas where the library might be requesting student names. It turns out that the library is ahead of the curve on campus, as its job application form for student assistants already asks for the preferred name of the student (versus legal name). Another area in the library where preferred name comes into play is the library-managed research repository, UNB Scholar. The metadata affiliated with the author field can be easily edited to include preferred name, if desired. The Scholarly Communications Librarian at UNB who manages the repository is conscious and sensitive to the fact that for many students who have transitioned, their birth names (sometimes referred to as “dead names”) are no longer representative, and would not be appropriate to use.

Conclusion

As organizations, there are many positive steps that libraries and archives can take to make trans people feel welcome and comfortable. In addition to providing safe spaces, libraries play a key role in providing access to up-to-date resources, creating trans friendly policies, and championing transgender rights and equality. By removing any possible barriers to access, libraries send a message of inclusivity and support.

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