



# **“It’s a very straight space”: gender-diverse students’ narratives about the Library**

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## Land acknowledgement

[A dish with one spoon](#). From: *Skoden: Teaching, Talking, and Sharing About and for Reconciliation*

[Image](#): "Treaty belts, such as the Dish with One Spoon belt and the Two Row Wampum, are examples of agreements between Indigenous nations and the provincial and federal non-Indigenous governments."

# Learning outcomes

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- By the end of this session, you will recall:
  - Key themes from a qualitative study of gender-diverse students' experiences with the Brock Library
  - Students' suggestions for enhancing Library support
  - At least one takeaway you can incorporate into your workplace

# Why do this study?

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- Research question: “How do transgender, nonbinary and gender-diverse students experience and perceive academic library spaces, services and collections?”
- Anecdotal evidence of harms/challenges experienced by students
- Lack of literature specific to gender-diverse students
- Lack of qualitative studies



## “Nothing about us without us”

- Arose from disability rights movement
- Recognizes importance of participatory research into vulnerable populations
- **Always partner with a community member!**

## A note about language

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- Gender-diverse used as an umbrella description for people whose gender identity differs from the gender they were assigned at birth and/or for people who do not adhere to gender binary stereotypes
- No universally accepted/preferred descriptor; others may prefer e.g. gender non-conforming

# Why a qualitative study?

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- Qualitative research elicits thoughts, feelings and richly detailed expressions of personal experiences which cannot be fully “examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity and frequency”<sup>1</sup> as done by quantitative research.
- Prioritizing students’ experiences, perceptions & behaviours useful for investigating how services work, and how they could be improved<sup>2</sup>
- Good for gathering exploratory data to generate ideas for further research
- Case studies can be used to explain, describe or explore events or phenomena in the everyday contexts in which they occur<sup>4</sup>:  
Good for answering How? What? Why? questions

# Practices to increase rigor

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Researcher reflexivity

Member checking

Memo-ing



# Overview of project

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- Recruitment:
  - March 2020-February 2021
  - Challenging during COVID!
  - Attracted six participants
- Method:
  - Semi-structured interviews; pivoted to online due to COVID
  - Data analysis using inductive thematic coding & NVIVO software

# Thank yous

- To the amazing students who participated in the study (pseudonyms):
  - Mac – trans man, grad student
  - Frankie – nonbinary, undergrad
  - Finn – trans man, undergrad
  - Avery – nonbinary, undergrad
  - Vina – nonbinary, grad student
  - Morgan – genderqueer, undergrad
- To Canadian Association of Research Libraries
- **To all of you!**



# Key themes

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- “I felt good about being queer in that space”: experiences with library workers
- “It’s a very straight space”: narratives about the library’s physical environment
- “It does hurt – it always will”: narratives related to gender identity and expression
- “It has changed my life”: experiences with library materials
- “The Library is a space that can really push this forward”: suggestions for change



**“I felt good  
about being  
queer in that  
space”**

# Experiences with library workers

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- Most students expressed positive sentiments
- Morgan: Library workers are “very lovely and very helpful”
- Mac: “really great interactions”
- Finn: Makerspace student number policy made them feel comfortable

# Interactions with liaison librarians - 1

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Mac described visiting his librarian's office:

*"... it was such a great interaction: half of it was just talking about other stuff that had nothing to do with my research and in that, it corresponded with my previous conceptions of the library space, other libraries I've been at, so then I was like, 'OK, this is actually a friendly space there, friendly people here' and I feel comfortable here ... I felt good about being queer in that space."*

## Interactions with librarians - 2

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Frankie described asking their “friendly” librarian for help researching queer topics:

*“she always had an answer for me, which was really nice ... her readiness for me helped me feel like I belonged, and that my research really mattered.”*

# “Asking people for help is very, very scary”: Avery

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- Some students preferred online interactions:
  - Avoids misgendering
  - Avoids vocal dysphoria
  - Anxiety over gender diversity layered over shyness/library anxiety





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**“It’s a very  
straight space”**

## Bathrooms: “The temptation is just not to go”

- Gendered library bathrooms site of discomfort, fear – particularly for those whose appearance flouts gender norms

Morgan:

*“...if I'm wearing a dress or if I'm wearing a skirt and a blouse or whatever, do I go into the male washroom, and possibly get the shit kicked out of me? ... Or do I go in the female washroom and get different negative reactions?”*

Mac:

*“The temptation is probably just not to go, which is very bad.”*

## “...You deserve a place to pee”

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- Some students use accessible washrooms: problematic on many levels

Morgan:

Gender-neutral bathrooms – either replacing or complimenting gendered facilities – *“is a statement... that the library is not neutral in this issue: ‘We think you deserve a place to pee’.”*

*“Is that too much to ask for, for people to have a place they can pee?”*

# Stigma, safety and reading the room

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- Gender-diverse people are hyper-aware of environment, alert for threats
- Library environment can trigger internalized anxieties from “lifetimes of stigma”

*Avery: “I think a lot of us fear that space. We fear a lot of public spaces.”*

# Staying safe in the library

Frankie:

*"I just kind of read the people in the room. So if it's a whole room full of athletes and a bunch of straight guys, that population, that demographic is who generates fear for me. I usually distance myself from them. So that's usually what it is. That, or when people are speaking very loudly ... let's say if they were to say something problematic, and I am usually the social justice warrior to try to fight back a bit ... (but) for my own safety, I have to pick my battles and what I'm going to say, 'cause even though what they are saying is problematic, my safety still comes first."*



**"The library is a very straight space"**

Morgan: *"the library is a very straight space in that it doesn't deviate from social norms and it's a very normal plain library with normal plain aesthetics."*

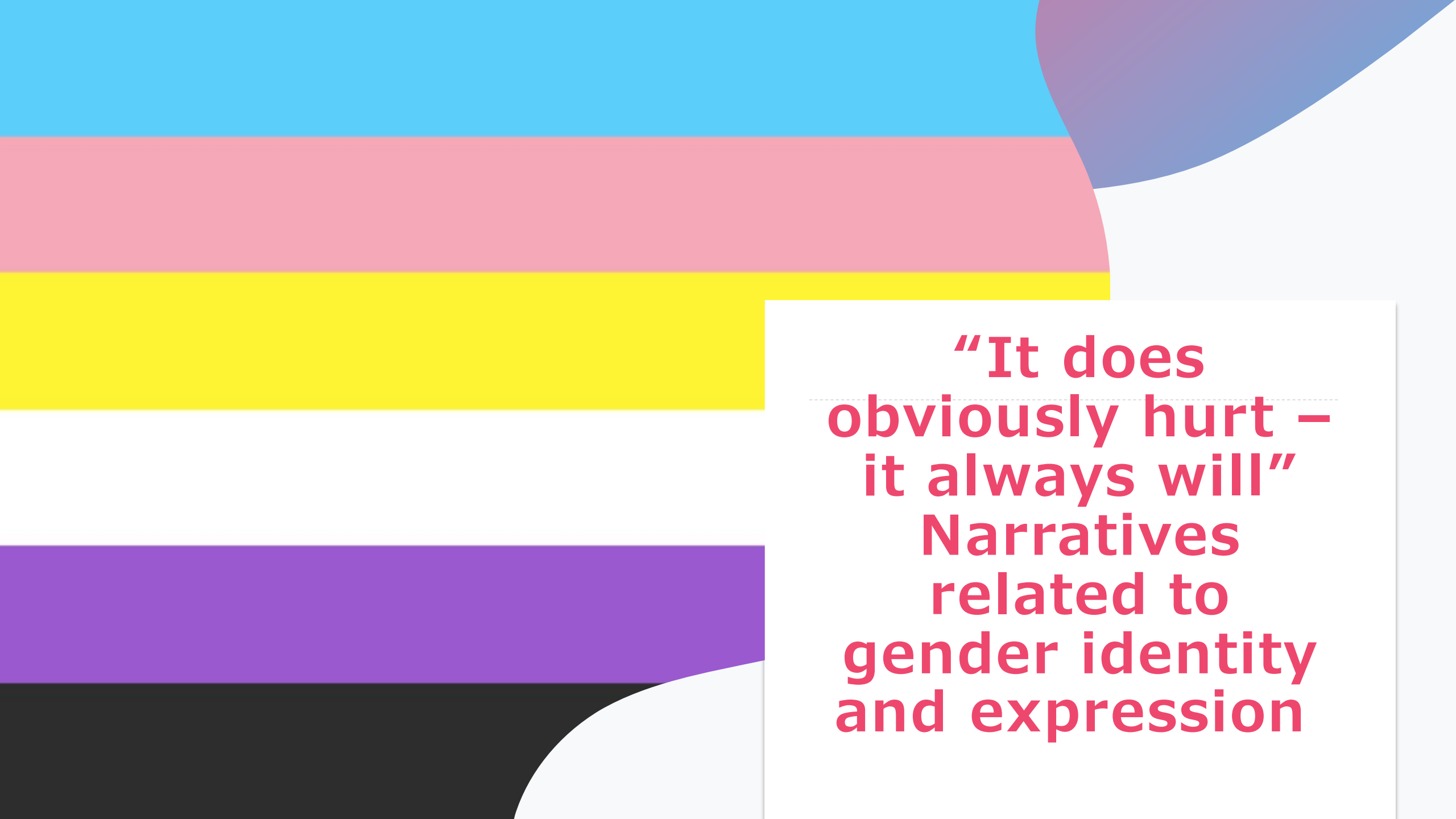
**Study Space Galore on Floors 2 and 5-10**



## Aspiring to neutrality

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- Morgan: The library's aesthetics signal that it *“aspires to feel neutral in a society that's not neutral ... Straight cisgender people don't need a space to feel comfortable being straight and cisgender because that's the planet that they're on ... that's everywhere. So you know, being treated equal in reality puts a disadvantage on minoritized groups, whether it's people with disabilities or people with diverse entities or people of different races or etc.”*



**“It does  
obviously hurt –  
it always will”  
Narratives  
related to  
gender identity  
and expression**



# Definitions

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- Gender identity: internal & individual experience of gender
- Gender expression: public expression/presentation of gender via behaviour, clothing, makeup, etc.

## “Gender is ... something you do”

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- Stares, derogatory comments common for those expressing gender diversity
- Passing as cisgender = privilege, protection

Morgan: Gender personal, changeable

*“Gender is not something that is innately true about me, but rather it is a thing that I perform in a category of communications,”* said Morgan, referencing gender scholar Judith Butler. *“If I'm feeling more feminine one day, then I might perform gender in a more feminine way.”*

Mac: *“Gender isn't something you are, it's something you do.”*

YOU DON'T GET  
TO DECIDE WHETHER  
SOMETHING YOU SAID

HURT  
ME



OR  
NOT

Students are misgendered by Library technology – computers, room booking systems, online library accounts – hardwired to use legal names

Finn: *“Online things like to automatically call me the wrong names.”*

## “They're looking at me and seeing something different”

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- Library staff good about “sticking with” proper name, pronouns in AskUs desk interactions
- Some students comfortable correcting people who misgender them
- Coffee shop – not so good!

Finn: *“I will say my name and it'll be like, ‘Are you sure?’ 'cause they're looking at me and seeing something different. I know I had one person who three times in a row wrote (a female name) on my cup ... I just kind of got used to it, but also it does obviously hurt -- it always will.”*



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**“It has  
changed my  
life”**

## Experiences with library materials

- Encounters with books, course readings central in experiences of library
- Some dismayed by inaccurate, outdated materials
- Others happy with range, content of resources



# Queer & trans voices in the collection

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- Importance of shared lived experiences & perspectives
- Highlighting these works signals inclusion

Morgan: *“Seeing stuff like that just in small ways can let you know that there is support within the structure of the place that you're in, right? Like if you're seeing LGBTQ+ folks being highlighted, well, that means that somebody in that space deemed that worth highlighting ... that did make me feel more included in that space ... It made me feel like my viewpoint was one that the library felt was worth giving special attention to, for however long that display was up.”*

# Finding yourself on the shelf

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- Works on gender diversity can transform lives
- Mac was ashamed, avoided exploring his gender identity until one summer he spent in the stacks; now, he researches & presents on gender issues

*“Finding those books really, really impacted my social life, personal life and my academic life actually…”*

*“I've experienced a complete change in the way of my thinking of myself and my gender and these issues, and I'm so glad that I have -- it's changed my life.”*



# Supporting privacy & gender exploration

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- Self-checkout vital for enhancing comfort, privacy
- Students valued reading books by trans/queer authors: representation, support for exploring their own identities

Mac: *"It's like talking to someone who is also trans. And they've had similar experiences to you, except for they thought about it more and they know more and they can tell you things about yourself. And someone who's not trans can't do that."*

## "Whose voices are being paid to be in our libraries?": Frankie

- Library collection seen as privileging "straight, white, cis men"
- Encounters with outdated inaccurate terminology & information frustrating, upsetting

Vina: *"So my feelings were just being very confused and for me just to do more research on it, just to know more about it or to see where they did go wrong."*

# Who are we platforming?

- Libraries have been rewarded for providing platforms for transphobic speakers under the guise of intellectual freedom

Morgan:

*"It's not academic honesty, integrity, ... when someone who is spouting transphobic beliefs is not backed up by research, is not backed up by anything really except 'tradition' ... (Library workers should be asking) 'Am I allowing anyone to speak because I care about some, you know, obscure concept of freedom of speech and integrity or am I doing it because I don't want people to be mad at me?'"*

# The bigger picture

# What is the broader context?

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- Gender-diverse individuals experience “stigmatization, prejudice, bias and fear on a daily basis” which can lead to isolation and discrimination in all settings, including education.<sup>5</sup>
- Gender-diverse students in higher ed<sup>6</sup>:
  - Higher rates of harassment & bullying, dropping out
  - Structural oppression: systems which “deadname” in IT, classroom practices, institutional policies
  - Alter their gender expression on campus for their own safety



# Bathroom battlegrounds

70% of respondents to the Trans PULSE Canada survey aged 14-24 say they avoid public washrooms<sup>7</sup>

Stares, derogatory comments and assaults are routinely experienced by gender-diverse people using bathrooms in public places<sup>8,9,10</sup>

Image: [Zachary Crockett / Vox](#)

# What about Brock?

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- Between .25 - .58% of population identifies as gender-diverse > between 48-115 students at Brock<sup>11</sup>
  - Likely greatly underestimated!
- Campus Climate Survey – gender diverse respondents<sup>12</sup>:
  - highest proportion of experiences with exclusionary, intimidating, offensive, and/or hostile conduct based on gender identity
  - not feeling valued by staff, faculty and senior administration
  - lower feelings of belonging, less represented in course content
  - barriers with facilities including bathrooms and changing rooms and with system barriers including electronic databases, identity cards and intake forms.

# Gender diversity & libraries: guidance

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- Libraries are called upon to “actively affirm and support the safety and rights of transgender people.”<sup>13</sup>
- "Libraries and library staff have a professional obligation to not only provide equitable access to resources and library services for all members of their community, including transgender library users, but also to promote a service philosophy that includes this population.”<sup>14</sup>



# Gender diversity & libraries: realities

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- Population faces unique needs, substantial barriers obtaining quality library services: 97% of survey respondents needed adaptations to feel safe and welcome<sup>15</sup>
- Documented barriers and challenges:
  - "collection development, transphobic and/or homophobic library staff, fear of being outed, lack of feeling safe in approaching library staff, difficulty in determining the trustworthiness of internet-based resources, and difficulties in selecting search terms and using the controlled vocabulary."

# Gender diversity, libraries and intellectual freedom

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- Librarianship valorizes free speech at the expense of oppression and harms to gender-diverse people
  - e.g Toronto Public Library receiving OLA Intellectual Freedom award, commendation from CFLA
- Trans rights an “acute site of political contestation in universities, libraries and society as a whole”<sup>16</sup>
- Neutrality is “polite” homophobia and transphobia<sup>17</sup>
- Academic librarians should use their academic freedom to combat transphobia<sup>18</sup>:

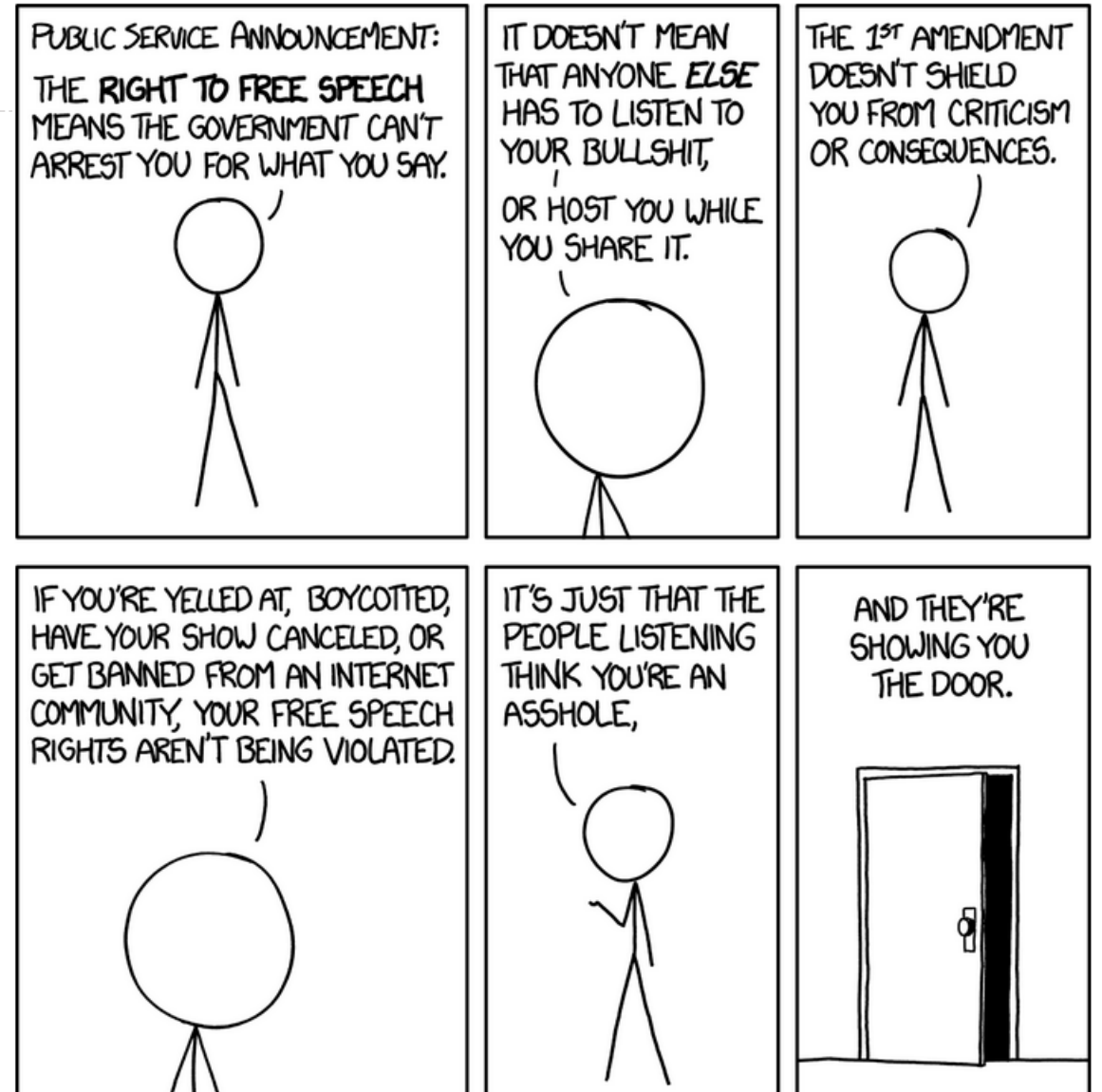
**“I recognize that you can’t take on every battle, but trans people are literally dying because of the views espoused by so-called ‘gender critical’ activists.”**

**Hazel Jane Plante, author & academic librarian**



# APLA's position

- Declined to endorse CFLA statement supporting TPL 
- Recognized harms caused
- Now focusing on PD for members



# Sara Ahmed

"... anti-trans statements should not be treated as just another viewpoint that we should be free to express at a happy diversity table. ... When you have 'dialogue or debate' with those who wish to eliminate you from the conversation (because they do not recognize what is necessary for your survival or because they don't even think your existence is possible), then 'dialogue and debate' becomes another technique of elimination."<sup>19</sup>



Trans Army

June 3 at 5:17 PM · 🌐









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**“The Library is a  
space that can  
really push this  
forward”**

# Students' suggestions for change

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- Training for library staff 
- Normalizing pronoun use 
- Enabling self-checkout 
- Using chosen names – in person and via technology 
- Gender-neutral bathrooms
- Building queer-friendly spaces, collections and connections
- Restricting problematic library materials

## Your turn: Google Jamboards

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- Pick a discussion board and leave some comments
- Gender-neutral bathrooms - [bit.ly/APLA-bathrooms](https://bit.ly/APLA-bathrooms)
- Using chosen names - [bit.ly/APLA-names](https://bit.ly/APLA-names)
- Queering the library - [bit.ly/APLA-queerthelibrary](https://bit.ly/APLA-queerthelibrary)



# Summing up

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- Overall, students had positive impressions of the library and its employees
- Our collections have potential to both harm and help students
- Bathrooms are a site of great discomfort and/or fear for gender diverse students
- Students' concerns are reflected in statistics and scholarly studies
- We have the opportunity – and responsibility – to make things better

# Questions?

- Please reach out – I'm happy to chat!
- Also interested in partnering with a community member on further research
- [eyates@brocku.ca](mailto:eyates@brocku.ca)
- Twitter: @LibraryWriteHer



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