# The Pronoun Puzzle

A Beginner's Guide to Creating a
Trans-Friendly Library

*Suzanne Taylor (she/her), Information Technology Librarian, Mount St. Mary's University*

*Elli Cucksey (she/her), Head Librarian, Trinity Lutheran Seminary at Capital University*

**ABSTRACT:** Intended for any audience, this is a beginner's guide to inclusively interacting with transgender patrons in a library setting. We hope you will find information about creating a welcoming environment and providing resources to transgender persons. The session was meant to be an informational session regardless of institutional background or religious identity. The presenters relayed a selection of key terms and points of awareness relevant to the transgender community. We did not intend this to be a discussion on the validity or authenticity of identities, but rather a guide to interactions that allow library professionals to reduce library anxiety for a specific population.

## INTRODUCTION

(Suzanne) We like to believe that libraries, especially our own, are welcoming spaces, with approachable staff and indispensable resources. In fact, most library workers strive ceaselessly to create such a space and to continue to improve upon it. Most library workers, especially those in academic libraries, are well aware that library users encounter multiple barriers to use, despite the fact that their library is expressly for the benefit of those same students. Of course, that is assuming that this given student enjoys status within majority groups on campus. For students who have been marginalized, the barriers to library use increase. While at this point in our collective understanding of academic libraries many library workers do not need convincing that anxiety and other fears get in the way of students using the resources that they have, in fact, already paid for, several of us may not be fully aware of the specific barriers to use affecting transgender and gender-expansive individuals.

In order to bring awareness to these barriers and suggest methods to begin breaking them down, we will suggest actionable ways to demonstrate to transgender library users that they are safe, valued, and welcome in the space. Having established that, we will introduce basic terminology and corrections to outdated or offensive terms. We acknowledge that each library exists in its own context and each library worker has varying degrees of control in terms of programing, displays, bathroom designations and other such decisions. Our goal then is to offer options that are accessible regardless of context.

## THE EXPERIENCE OF LIBRARY ANXIETY

At the risk of playing the broken record that is discussion about library anxiety, transgender folk, as well as all marginalized library users, experience library anxiety that is compounded by other societal inequities. While library anxiety can be present in any student or library user, some people will have more barriers to library use.

Since the term *library anxiety* was coined, it has undergone a few iterations. Here I want to note Kelleen Maluski and Symphony Bruce's work that notes that library anxiety is not a deficiency on the part of the user, but rather a systemic issue in academic institutions as a whole that keeps various minority groups from feeling a sense of belonging because the institution was not built for them (2022). These authors focus on the barriers that exist within the library and larger institution, rather than simply changing the feelings of the minority user. This view—the view that these barriers exist institution wide—can help recontextualize the need for trans-friendly libraries. Because "trans-spectrum students reported that anxiety and stress negatively influenced their academics at higher rates than their cisgender peers" (Rankin, Garvey, and Duran 2019, 13), the need for the library to be a place of safety and belonging becomes even more apparent. Today, we'll be using this term specifically to mean any anxiety an individual feels because of barriers or anxiety that becomes a barrier to library use.

Transgender individuals are dealing with a compounded library anxiety; they have to assess their actual safety (Bonner-Thompson, Mearns, and Hopkins 2021, 288) as well as their comfort with any given librarian, and within the library space. It might, in fact, be

helpful to imagine that a trans library user assumes a hostile environment until demonstrated otherwise rather than the other way around.  We need to break down these barriers and put them on equal footing with library users in more privileged positions.

## AN ATMOSPHERE OF BELONGING STARTS WITH SAFETY

Most librarians would agree that creating a space that is safe and welcoming is of the utmost importance; however when creating this space for transgender folks, consideration must be given both to the physical and emotional safety of those individuals. Safety is an issue that transgender people struggle with in nearly every physical location they inhabit. We must be cognizant of the cues we give in our libraries that indicate a safe or unsafe environment. Understanding and respect is crucial, and it is not enough to merely tolerate an individual's presence. We believe that each person deserves to be treated with respect and recognition of their humanity.

   At each of our respective libraries we have varying degrees of control, and we recognize that there are unique limitations in each workplace for how many changes can be implemented (e.g., adding gender neutral bathrooms, having more inclusive materials, displaying said materials, etc.). Yet we can each decide to be the welcoming, safe person in our library space. Of course, it is not enough to believe that you are a safe person, but you also need to make that clear to your library users as well. In this next section, we will cover ways to do this.

## SIGNALING SAFETY

In order to signal that you are a safe person in particular, you can choose to adopt specific practices. For example, while many people may be familiar with pins and stickers that have a person's pronouns listed, just as many people may be unaware that it is just as helpful, if not crucial, for a cisgendered person to wear them. For example, a cisgendered librarian who wears a pin that says "she/her" can help normalize the accessory, making others who choose to wear one seem less out of place. This also, of course, literally sends a

message or acceptance. Later on in the presentation, Elli will cover introducing yourself using your pronouns.

I want to touch on the following two suggestions for those who are able to do so. These are steps taken to mitigate harm for gender expansive individuals. While this presentation is meant to focus on terminology and interaction with the community, I would be remiss to ignore a few things that might seem passive to us but can cause active harm.

While this could be an entire presentation on its own, consider changing your metadata and subject headings to less harmful language (Watson et al. 2023). For example, "transsexuals" is not the word the community of transgender folks use to describe themselves, yet it is still listed as a Narrower Term under the "Transgender" Library of Congress Subject Heading (Library of Congress, n.d.; Roberto 2011, 58). It can be incredibly hurtful to use this word since, as of 2024, it is generally used in a derogatory sense. (We include more information on metadata and subject headings in our resources list.)

Another action that you can take, which again is its own presentation, is weeding harmful books on the topic of transgender and gender expansive people (Currier and White 2019, 9–10). We know that this is a sensitive topic at a theological librarianship conference, so we will not delve any deeper. However, resources on this will also be available by scanning the QR code at the end of the presentation.

## INTRODUCTION TO GENDER EXPANSIVENESS/VARIETY

(Elli) For the purposes of this brief discussion, let us agree on a few things, regardless of ideology. First, let's accept that it is our wish to make our resources available to those to whom our institution grants access in the easiest, most comfortable manner possible. We wish to make each of these individuals as comfortable as possible to allow them to complete the work that they have set out to do with the fewest possible barriers. Second, we might also agree that, to that end, we will assume a person is the gender that they tell you they are, regardless of what we might believe about gender from a social or religious perspective. If I tell you that I am a woman, I expect the librarian (or the fast-food server, or the grocery cashier, or even the dentist) to, at minimum, respectfully not question the fact

in my presence. A trans person has the right to expect the same. This is not about us changing your mind about the validity of another's gender expression, but neither is it about you changing the mind of that individual.

In addition to accepting what we are told about a person's gender or pronouns, we all need to agree that we don't know anything, nor do we need to know anything about a person's sexual preferences based on their gender expression. You might assume that a transperson is "gay," but what are you really assuming? And do you need to know anything about who this person is attracted to so you can help them access the resources in your library?

## SOME VOCABULARY TO NOTE

A few vocabulary notes: *AFAB* and *AMAB* to start. The most important thing about these terms is that you probably don't need to use them in relation to a patron in your library. They simply mean "Assigned Female at Birth" or "Assigned Male at Birth." Since we all know that these assignments are determined based on the genitalia of the newborn, it's almost always irrelevant in conversation in the library. Individuals may choose to disclose this, but since it's literally identifying the genitalia one was born with, it's a bit creepy to talk about.

Some other vocabulary that you should steer clear of in your interactions would be terms like *cross-dresser* or *transvestite*. Transvestite is just a word we don't use anymore due to its long use as a negative term, and cross-dressing is not the same thing as transitioning one's gender.

More vocabulary that you should be familiar with would include terms like *cisgender* and *transgender*. You may have come to believe that *cisgender* is some kind of slur, and I hope that you will not believe that. It was never intended as anything other than a way to be clear in language. If there are people who have transitioned their gender, there are people who have not, who are still living and experiencing life as the gender they were assigned at birth—and that is described as *cisgender*. *Transgender*, then is just an adjective to describe a person who has transitioned their gender. Let's remember that we should never refer to someone as "a transgender" or

"transgendered." Often those of us who have many friends in this community have come to understand that this is a negative or hurtful thing to say without giving real thought to why, so when we try to explain it to folks who are just being introduced to these concepts, we stumble a bit. The best and most succinct explanation I've found is that by referring to someone as "a transgender," you are simply turning a descriptive adjective into a defining noun. While a trans person may be more defined by their gender than a cis person, it is by no means the defining characteristic of that person. They are people with many other defining characteristics. I personally know pastors, parents, teachers, librarians, spouses, grandparents, artists, and musicians who would much rather be defined by these roles than their gender, or the fact that they have socially transitioned their gender at some point in their past.

## BEYOND THE BINARY

So far, we've talked about men and women—the binary of gender. There is more than that. Some folks understand themselves to be a gender that doesn't match either of those, or some combination of those, or that they move between those. I'm not here to help you understand that. I don't understand that any more than I can understand being a man. We just accept that the truth about a person's gender is what that person understands it to be. Two helpful terms for these people are *nonbinary* and *agender*. Sometimes you might hear *enby*, which is just the pronunciation of "NB" for nonbinary. There are so many different ways that these individuals might present their gender identification, or not—and in the end, none of that is relevant to providing library services. It is of note that these are the largest group of people using they/them for single pronouns, and that brings us to the meat of our session...

## THOSE PESKY PRONOUNS

I have been putting my pronouns on my email signature and name tags and zoom identifiers for about a decade now. There are a few reasons for that. I am not interested in having a fight with folks who do not do this. If you feel strongly that you don't want to share your pronouns, no one is going to make you. You need to know that

there are *your* reasons for not sharing, and there are many other reasons a person might not want to share. I will not assume that I know your reasons. I share mine because I have watched someone I love navigate a world where no one ever asked for pronouns, and they felt uncomfortable bringing it up, and I wanted to contribute to changing the norm. By adding my pronouns, I have helped to normalize it being in signatures, even though I am rarely misgendered by the pronouns people assume for me. Now, someone who might have pronouns that are not what most would assume can add theirs to a signature, or a nametag, or simply mention them in introduction, and it's just a bit less awkward.

There's another layer to this. In my professional life, I also choose not to use a gendered honorific whenever possible. I am not ordained, nor do I hold a doctorate degree. Therefore, the most socially appropriate honorific for me is *Mrs*. I do not feel it is necessary to be listed anywhere with that honorific which translates to "married woman" before my name. Neither my gender nor my marital status are even remotely relevant when you are looking for the librarian at Trinity. I could choose to use *Mx*. (pronounced "mix"); however, I feel like that is making a different statement, and since I don't have claim to a non-binary identity, I will not appropriate that unnecessarily.

So, how do I ask for pronouns? The easiest way is with a smile. I usually just mention that I use she/her, and then just say, "can I ask yours?" If someone is uncomfortable stating, or says that they don't use pronouns, just don't use any pronouns for them. It's sometimes awkward, but it's not that hard. And it gets easier with practice. Instead of asking my student worker to "help Jack get his books from the hold shelf." I might say, "help Jack to get *some* books from the hold shelf." Speak slowly and think. Practice helps.

## MISTAKES

We all make mistakes! Quickly correct yourself and move on.

You *will* mess up. Everyone does. I have been doing this with friends and family members for many years. You *will* slip. Nobody cares. The most important thing is the effort. Don't make a big deal, don't trip over yourself in apologies. Correct yourself and move on. If you are corrected by someone else, restate your sentence correctly

and go on; a quick thank-you for the correction maybe. That's it. By not making a bigger deal out of it, you allow the person to move on, too. They don't want their whole interaction with the librarian to be about the tense correction of pronouns.

For most of us the most difficult pronoun set to adopt is *they/them* for the single person. I'm not here to tell you this is simple or debate the correctness of it. There are hundreds of years of usage, and you have been doing it your whole life when nobody drew attention to it. I've been doing it throughout this presentation, and nobody has batted an eye. I'll give you the sentence that will prove it:

> "Look, someone left their water bottle in here from the last session and I hope they remember this is where they had it last."

Nothing about that sentence sounds weird to you unless I put a name in the place of "someone."

> "Look, Vance left their water bottle in here from the last session and I hope they remember this is where they had it last."

Now, it sounds funny to you because you've never known Vance to have any other pronouns than he/him. But when you didn't know who the person is, it sounds fine, right? And it's almost certainly just a single person who owns a water bottle, right? Really, though, it isn't that you didn't know *who*, it's that you didn't know the *gender* of the unknown person, because you can't tell a person's gender by a water bottle. People who use *they/them* are kind of telling you the same thing. You don't have the information to determine how they might fit into one of just two categories. Whether you believe that is possible or not isn't relevant, because you can only know what gender they are by what they tell you; so we're going to use *they/them* because they asked us to, and there's really nothing else for us to concern ourselves with.

I say all of this, and I sound confident, and I am. But again, you will mess this one up. I have a very loved one in my daily life, and I still mess it up from time to time. It's not hurtful to make a mistake. It's only an offense if you never try. If you are corrected and then can't hold the thought through the next sentence, then it looks like you didn't try. Therefore, you are making a statement. If you want to make that statement, fine, but now you've violated our first

agreement about how we all want to make our patrons comfortable in our library spaces.

## CONCLUDING NOTES

As library workers, we want to promote welcoming environments. However, we also know we can't change everything overnight or control our entire institutions. Focus on actionable items like making a habit of introducing yourself using your own pronouns; make sure your collections and metadata do not have harmful or outdated terms. Recognize that learning new things can take time and practice, and that making mistakes is normal. What is most important is that you show your library users that they are valued and respected.

## REFERENCES

Currier, Brett D., and Tessa White. 2019. "Creating the Trans Inclusive Library." LIS Scholarship Archive. *https://doi.org/10.31229/osf.io/re8gf*.

Bonner-Thompson, Carl, Graeme William Mearns, and Peter Hopkins. 2021. "Transgender Negotiations of Precarity: Contested Spaces of Higher Education." *Geographical Journal* 187 (3): 227–39. *https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12384*.

LGBTQIA Resource Center. 2015. "LGBTQIA Resource Center Glossary." Last updated July 21, 2023. *https://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/glossary*.

Guyan, Kevin. 2021. "Diversity Monitoring in the Library: Categorisation Practices and the Exclusion of LGBTQ Library Users." *The International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion* 5 (4): 6–20. *https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/48641977.pdf*

American Library Association (ALA). n.d. "Libraries Respond: Protecting and Supporting Transgender Staff and Patrons" Accessed July 15, 2024. *https://www.ala.org/advocacy/diversity/librariesrespond/transgender-staff-patrons*.

Library of Congress. "Library of Congress Subject Headings PDF Files." n.d. Accessed July 15, 2024. //*www.loc.gov/aba/publications/ FreeLCSH/*.

Maluski, Kelleen, and Symphony Bruce. 2022. "Dispelling the Myth of Library Anxiety and Embracing Academic Discomfort." *In the Library with the Lead Pipe.* Accessed June 10, 2024. *https://www. inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2022/myth-of-library-anxiety/*.

PFLAG. n.d. "The PFLAG National Glossary: LGBTQ+ Terminology." n.d. PFLAG. Accessed June 10, 2024. *https://pflag.org/glossary/*.

Rankin, Susan, Jason C. Garvey, and Antonio Duran. 2019. "A Retrospective of LGBT Issues on US College Campuses: 1990– 2020." *International Sociology* 34 (4): 435–54. *https://doi. org/10.1177/0268580919851429*.

Roberto, K. R. 2011. "Inflexible Bodies: Metadata for Transgender Identities." *Journal of Information Ethics* 20 (2). Jefferson, NC: McFarland: 56–64. *https://doi.org/10.3172/JIE.20.2.56*.

Shelmerdine, Anna J. 2018. "Library Anxiety: Stories, Theories and Possible Solutions." *Journal of the Australian Library & Information Association* 67 (4): 343–52. *https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.201 8.1534281*.

Stonewall. "List of LGBTQ+ Terms." 2020. Stonewall. May 28, 2020. *https://www.stonewall.org.uk/list-lgbtq-terms*.

Watson, B. M, Devon Murphy, Beck Schaefer, and Jackson Huang. 2023. "'Our Metadata, Ourselves': The Trans Metadata Collective." *Proceedings of the ASIST Annual Meeting* 60 (1). Hoboken, USA: John Wiley & Sons: 433–41. *https://doi.org/10.1002/pra2.801*.