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On Being Seen, on Being Legible, on Being: A Black, Agender Perspective on a Career in Libraries

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I remember lying in bed one night, around six years old, puzzling over a word that a fellow child on the playground had called me earlier that day. We had been in the tire tower during recess; they were sitting in its bowels and I was climbing past them to the top. His friend had asked him if I was a girl or a boy, and they had replied that I was a “tomboy.” I don’t think that in the moment, in the tire tower, that I’d paused to agree or disagree with that stranger child. I think I just kept on climbing. But later that night I remember coming back to that word tomboy and asking myself whether I was, indeed, a boy. I decided no, because I didn’t feel like a boy. Then I asked myself if I felt like a girl, and the answer came again as no. When I looked inside for where gender might be there was instead a blankness, a field of gray lit by a pale sun. I was a not-girl not-boy, and because I didn’t know what to do with that information, or what use it gave me, I put it aside for another day. There just wasn’t anything I could do with it. I placed it in the back of my mind for the rest of my childhood and adolescence until, in late high school, I found an online community on tumblr.com and saw other users talking about a gender identity called non-binary and another one called agender. And all at once I remembered what I’d already realized about myself so long ago.

I knew I was Black much earlier than six. I only had to look at my skin, and at my parents, to know this. I confess that when I was growing up, I found myself much more resistant to my blackness than I was to my lack of gender. My blackness was something that other kids and teachers could, and sometimes did, see as a fault about me. My family tried to teach me to love my blackness, but it's a difficult thing to do in a society like ours that devalues blackness so, so much. It took me a while to embrace my skin and my culture.

Though I've always felt at home in libraries, it was not a profession that I immediately gravitated to. For a while, it felt like too obvious a career choice. Just because I loved to read didn't mean I would make a good librarian. But when I began to head into the latter half of my undergraduate studies and found myself in need of both work experience and a tentative career path, libraries presented themselves as a welcoming option. The actual, visible work of librarianship was about as mysterious to me as it was to anyone else who had only ever been a patron, but after looking more into it, it seemed like work I could do. It looked to be organization, helping other people with their research, helping people find books they were interested in reading, giving those patrons a public space to exist without obligation or fee. When I graduated with my bachelor's, I went straight into pursuing a master's in library science. A couple of months after the start of my first semester, I started my first academic library position as a staff member in the medical library at that same university.

In this first position, because it was a fairly small library with a fairly small number of staff, I did a good amount of everything. I did the cataloging and some of the e-resource management, processed interlibrary loan requests, and sometimes helped the librarians on reference and research assistance requests. From this miscellaneous work, I gravitated to cataloging and classification. Everything felt so well-defined. Every book could be put in its proper place with only some subject analysis and cataloger's judgement. Scope notes and used fors. Authorized headings and local notes. A few more years into my career as a cataloger now, I know that these subject headings are not as static and objective

as I once thought them to be. I now recognize that these subject headings exist as reflections of the dominant groups that have created and maintained them. Furthermore, being institutionally-established things, these headings are inherently resistant to significant change, especially as they regard people-centered topics like ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Nevertheless, cataloging is still a field that I feel fairly at home in. The work of bridging the gap between the language we have available to us in our authorized headings to the language everyday users will search by is work that I'm committed to engaging in.

I wasn't out as a non-binary person at the medical library. It was a small library, and though there were a few people there who I knew wouldn't have a problem with it, I'd heard enough of my supervisor's political opinions to know that she would. I wasn't at a stage in my life where I felt emotionally equipped to explain that part of myself and defend my existence. I was already doing so much work to be perceived as a peaceable Black person in an astonishingly white work space that it felt like too much to add another thing on. There's actually a word someone gave me the other day to help me articulate this: legible. There's already a fairly wide cultural divide between myself and many of the colleagues and managers I've had in my brief career in libraries. We've grown up in very different ways, and have very different ways of naturally approaching work-related problems. As a young professional seeking to learn and grow as much as I could in this first position, I needed to remain legible to my white cis het manager and coworkers, because if I didn't, I wouldn't receive the information and mentoring I needed to be able to move on to higher positions.

So, I wasn't out gender-wise, but I did take this first position as an opportunity to try out different styles of professional dress that I might be able to carry forward into the rest of my career. I'd always looked at more masculine fashions and wanted to try them for myself, but hadn't yet been able to make the jump to actually wearing overtly masculine things. The best I'd been able to do before then was to emulate what I often referred to as, "twelve-year-old boy trying his best"—graphic t-shirts, jorts, Henleys. Buying ties and then never having the guts to

wear them outside of my bedroom. Boat shoes with skinny jeans. I never tilted too far to either end of the feminine-masculine spectrum, instead limiting myself to some safe, awkward patchwork of polos and ballet flats. But this library had a dress code, so I took the opportunity to try out different styles. I would wear a button-down shirt with straight-leg slacks on one day, a dress with flats the next. I can give partial credit to my former supervisor at this first position, who only complimented my appearance when I wore make-up or dressed femininely, with my full headlong tilt toward masculine presentation. I do not blame her; I somewhat understand her perspective. She probably saw me switching from slacks to skirts as me dressing up, and she wanted to acknowledge that in a positive way, so she complimented me. At the time, however, I just wanted to experiment with my gender presentation and remain unperceived while I did so (an impossible task, I now know). These interactions, however, did lead me to further question who I was from a gender presentation perspective, how I wanted other people to view me, and what compliments or comments I wanted people to have about my body. As time has gone on, I've gotten rid of my dresses, bought more button-downs and sweaters from the "men's" side of stores, and felt more and more like myself and who I want to become.

Certainly and obviously, one's gender is not wrapped up in what they wear, but finding a style of dress that brought me closer to how I wanted to be perceived did bring me some measure of confidence. It also made me more and more unwilling to continue letting people use pronouns for me that didn't fit. My friends, classmates, and professors knew to use they/them pronouns for me. I was studying at the same university for which I worked, and with the overlap between library science professors and librarians, it was becoming increasingly more difficult to compartmentalize and remember who knew me as they and who as she. Mostly to grow in my career and cataloging expertise, and partly to have a fresh start as Adrian the non-binary person, I applied for and was offered an open position as a cataloging associate in the main library's cataloging department.

I disclosed my gender to my supervisor at this new job for a couple of reasons. The first is that I knew I wouldn't be there for more than a couple of years at the most. I would be graduating from my master's program at the end of the year and interviewing for cataloging librarian positions after that, so I felt that any discrimination or negative attitudes about my gender could be endured for that relatively brief period of time. Other than the occasional misgendering, it was fairly easy to exist there as an agender person, especially since my job as a staff cataloger was fairly siloed and independent. I didn't have to worry too much about being misgendered to my face, because my job was so solitary that there were few people around to talk about me in my presence. Also, my supervisor there had a trans child that she advocated strongly for, so I had little to worry about from a management perspective.

Once I graduated with my MLIS, I began looking for librarian positions that would help me grow in my career. I applied to several places and ended up getting a couple of in-person interviews. The one that was more promising, more in line with the work I wanted to do and the type of library I wanted to be at, was ten hours away from my hometown. It was in Kentucky, a faraway land that I hadn't heard a single Black, queer thing about. I didn't want to go through the trouble of moving there and being so far away from everyone I loved before I knew whether or not it was safe for me to be myself there, so at the very beginning of the two-day in-person interview I told my would-be supervisor the name and pronouns that I use. My pronouns were used correctly for the rest of the interview, I was told where the gender-neutral bathrooms were without having to ask, and I was generally treated well. Despite the very small number of BIPOC there, it seemed like a good place to work, with projects I'd be excited to participate in.

I've been in this position for almost two years now, and I don't regret the decision to come here, nor to be as open as I've been. I've been able to meet a couple of other gender diverse people who work here and to speak openly about equity, diversity, and inclusion issues and equity opportunities our library system could take action on.

Occasionally, thinking back to my colleagues at that medical library and how kind and helpful they were to me, I regret not giving some of them the chance to know me. At the end of the day, I rationalize it in this way: despite the fact that (at the time of writing this) we're in 2021, a lot of people still aren't understanding of transgender and gender diverse people. Some may hide that intolerance or ignorance behind a gritted smile or neutral expression, but that doesn't take away from their bias against us. I was in my first library position and didn't want to damage my prospects by making the wrong people "uncomfortable." My parents are the survivalist type—keep your head down and stay out of the office politics types, smile and keep it to yourself types. They had taught me to prioritize my safety and security over my self-expression. I wasn't about to out myself unless I knew I could be safe doing so, or otherwise safely extricate myself from the situation.

I am not so much unlearning as reworking the rules I've set for myself on how to keep myself safe. I speak out more about equity, diversity, and inclusion issues at my current position than I ever have in my life. It is terrifying and fulfilling, and sometimes I don't do it right, but sometimes I do. The world in which I spend the majority of my time—which is to say, the public academic sphere—is progressing in uneven fits and starts towards treating transgender and gender diverse people better. Even still, when someone misgenders me and I find myself in the position of having to correct them, it feels like doing so is like asking to get punched in the face. More often than not, against my own self-interest, I don't correct people at all. It still feels terrifying and self-destructive. Do I remain legible to my colleagues, let them keep their misconception of me and in doing so protect my professional safety? Or do I fight for my inner self that deserves to be seen clearly as who I am?

There is also something to be said about being hypervisibly Black and invisibly trans, and the isolation that is both perpetuated by myself and by the people around me. Being trans in a roomful of cisgender people who have mistaken me as a cisgender woman has clued me into the fact that there are hateful and ignorant things that cisgender people will be perfectly comfortable saying as long as they don't think

the type of people they're talking about are present. This is something that I've known on an intellectual, commonsense level for a while, but to experience it in the flesh is simply another thing. It's made me a bit paranoid, to be honest, of what my white colleagues are comfortable saying when I'm not in the room. But I have to push past this paranoia and this isolation to connect and be seen and do my work.

I'm still early in my career, but my hope is for it to be a long one. I hope that, throughout the rest of my time as a cataloger, I can learn more and do more to make our library catalog and other systems inclusive and accessible to the people it has not historically been inclusive to. Libraries have given me a lot in my life, and I love them. Part of that love is participating in the movements and initiatives that seek to hold libraries accountable for their past and present injustices. I have neither the stamina nor courage to be an activist, but I want to do what I can in my daily life and work to improve things for those that come after me.

About the Author

Adrian Williams is a cataloging librarian. Their interests include inclusive subject headings and classification, linked data, and the history of classification and controlled vocabularies. They spend a lot of time outside of work indulging in their hobbies, which include Dungeons and Dragons, playing music, and riding their bike around town.