

# Gendered S(h)elves

## Body and Identity in the Library

Emily Drabinski

Queers of all kinds have always found a home in the library. Books are often the first refuge of the outsider, and the trope of feeling alone until finding that single magical book on the library shelves that makes the self make sense is a common one. (Mine was Tom Robbins' *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, when I was around 14. When Sissy Hankshaw and Bonanza Jellybean had fantastic queer sex in a field, so fantastic it caused the cranes to alter their migration patterns, my body told me I was probably whatever that was!) This will to identity is strong and persistent, perhaps, as Foucault (1977, 101) writes, "the highest temptation... the longing to be another, to be all others; it is to renew identifications and to achieve the principle of time in a return that completes the circle". This article seeks to complicate the romantic notion of the library as a space of uncritical identity formation. Rather than imagining the library as a deep well where anything and everything can be found, articulating the library as a space of rigorous organization and discipline allows us to understand both the limits and potentially libratory aspects of library space.

### The Library as a Classified Space

Criss-crossed with categories, the library is a highly classified space that contains representations of reality within a rigorous structure that is informed by and productive of other social spaces and identities. Classifications are built of two parts: subject headings that locate materials intellectually, and call numbers that translate the intellectual map into the linear reality of library shelves. Subject headings form a controlled vocabulary that pins materials into an intellectual structure that is both hierarchical — constructed of broader and narrower terms —

and syndetic — including related terms that connect disparate subjects across the classification and produce a kind of limited dimensionality. Where subject headings fix books in stable intellectual space, call numbers fix them in physical space. Each subject heading is correlated with a number that places the book in linear order on library shelves. This is an inescapable material constraint; each book can occupy one and only one space on a library shelf.

As books enter the library, they are embedded in the classification system and shelved in call number order, rendering the abstract space of the classification scheme real in the form of books on shelves. Subject headings allow users to locate single titles of interest through keyword or subject catalog searches while call numbers enable browsing. In self-exploration, as in academic research, looking at the titles around the book you want is a time-honored strategy for finding other materials. Take, for example, *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography*. Christine Jorgensen was one of the first publicly-visible transsexuals. Following sex-reassignment surgery in Denmark in 1952, Jorgensen's return to the United States as a woman was greeted with enormous publicity, including a story in the December 2, 1952 edition of the *New York Times*, proclaiming "Bronx 'Boy' Is Now A Girl." In 1967, Jorgensen published her autobiography. Where media coverage of her identity helped create a social category of 'transsexual' — men could now begin to envision themselves as women, albeit through the narrow lens offered by the sensationalized and medicalized presentation of the Jorgensen story — the entrance of her memoir into the library classification rendered 'transsexual' an accessible identity

for library users. Using the subject heading *Sex change—Biography* and browsing the call number area RC 560.C4, a user could find the story of Jorgensen's identity transformation and potentially locate themselves in the trajectory of her story.

### Libraries as Other Space

The space of the library, then, consists of locating books in a coherent and totalizing classification system. The classification system is marginally flexible insofar as it can generally expand to accommodate new knowledges that emerge historically (e.g., *Transsexuals*) but remains structurally limited (*Transsexuals* must be embedded within the existing hierarchical and syndetic structure, and once placed there cannot be moved). This process produces a space that both disciplines and reflects reality. Foucault (1986, 27) articulates this geographic formation as a kind of heterotopia, with the role of the library being "to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled... the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation". Where material reality might be



After Claude Cahun. Intervention #1.

unfixable and unnameable, the library functions both to fix and to name, producing a space that is reflective of a particular version of reality.

Gender troubles such a highly structured space. The library, in Foucault's (1986, 26) articulation, represents "the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all time that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages". Gender and sexuality are not immutable categories, and shift according to and against time and space. In her seminal essay, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination", Judith Butler (1991, 15) discusses this fundamental aspect of identity, 'coming out' as a lesbian while simultaneously marking the limits of such a named category: "To claim that this is what I am is to suggest a provisional totalization of this 'I.' But if the I can so determine itself, then that which it excludes in order to make that determination remains constitutive of the determination itself". In other words, at the moment identity is fixed, it constitutes an unnamed excess, the 'stuff' of other ways of being that are not represented by, in this case, the named category *Lesbian*.

The classification schemes that structure library space cannot account for this excess. In the case of Jorgensen's work, we might imagine the ways the marking of her identity creates space for other ways of being both Woman and Transsexual; by coming out, Jorgensen makes possible a category of Transsexual while simultane-

ously making possible categories of 'like Jorgensen, but not *exactly*.' Communities of queer gender practice have richly elaborated and constantly shifting named identities that take up and mark their own excesses in a movement similar to Butler's claiming of Lesbian: trans, tranny, trans dyke, MTF, M2F, FTM, F2M, genderqueer, femme, boi, butch, bear, aggressive, etc. These terms represent shifting and overlapping sexual and gender identities, deeply contextual and highly relational. In the space of the library, however, books about these identities will be assigned static subject headings that collate sometimes widely divergent representations of gendered selves. Books that articulate gender identity according to a medical model (e.g., the work of Harry Benjamin) and those that determinedly articulate gender as a political category (e.g., contemporary work on 'genderqueerness'), will be reduced to one another in the classification.

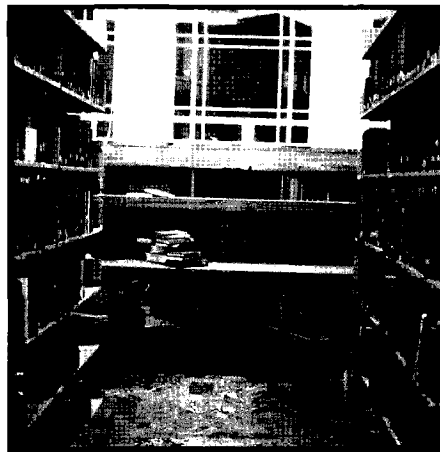
This trouble only becomes more acute at the level of physical shelf space. On library shelves, books can occupy one and only one space on the shelf, and once slotted are physically related to the books that carry the same call number and distanced from those carrying different call numbers. This can result in some strange separations. For example, Joanne Meyerowitz's (2002) *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* carries the subject heading Transsexualism-United States-History. Beginning with a discussion of Christine Jorgensen and placing her

story in the context of developments in gender scholarship and activism, the book is related in content to Jorgensen's and would seem to be of potentially informative interest to browsers seeking articulations of transsexual identity and experience. Because of the artifactual nature of the classification system, however, the two titles are separated by a large swath of the alphabet, with Jorgensen's work sitting at RC 560.C4 and Meyerowitz's at HQ77.95.E85. Jorgensen's text is placed according to the dominant theoretical frame of its time, one that considered gender a phenomenon purely of the mind and body, hence its position in the classification at the point of Psychiatry. Meyerowitz's work, however, is seen in the context of history and society, and is placed in the HQs, a sub-class reserved for *Sexual life* under the broader category Social sciences.

These strange separations result from an intellectual framework that is inhospitable to certain kinds of knowledges, in this case those related to gender. Some feminist library and information science scholars have suggested interventions that correct these dislocations by producing local schemes that explicitly grapple with the politics of knowledge organization, making classification projects political projects. Hope Olson and Susan Gold Smith (2006, 39) suggest that this kind of work mobilizes classifications as sites of resistance and transformation, "taki[ng] charge of classification as a defining tool and transgress its boundaries for our own liberation". Instead of shoehorning mate-



Intervention #2.



Intervention #3.



Intervention #4.

PHOTO ART: MAEVE HANNA

rials into preexisting categories in the LCs, Olson and Smith suggest developing schemes specific to particular collections, with categories emerging organically from the materials in the collection.

These ideas are perhaps most materially rendered in San Francisco's Prelinger Library. The curators of this collection organize materials on shelves according to a set of principles deliberately designed to promote "an integral approach to research and browsing" that is "browsing-based" rather than "query-based". Instead of developing a strict set of subject headings that map materials according to a coherent intellectual structure, the Prelingers shelve materials "around four constant threads: landscape and geography; media and representation; historical consciousness; and political narratives from beyond the mainstream" ([www.home.earthlink.net/~alysons/LibraryOrg.html](http://www.home.earthlink.net/~alysons/LibraryOrg.html)). This structure encourages fluid movement through the collection, and imagines knowledge acquisition in library space as serendipitous and accidental rather than determined by the organizers of the collection. In this case, the classification acknowledges the spatial reality engendered by the intellectual scheme and makes facilitating movement through the space central to the organizational project.

These interventions do important work in troubling knowledge organization as objective, apolitical, and value-free, and in creating library space that facilitates movement through the collection in ways that encourage the generation of new and unlikely knowledge formations. Still, libraries are ultimately bound by the necessity to fix materials in space. We might imagine, for example, a classification that organized a library of materials related to gender for a trans and gender variant population. This classification might be built using the language trans communities use to name themselves, and could organize materials according to conceptions of the gendered self. The scheme might arrange materials by gender category or analytical approach, placing books in an order that would encourage browsers to see the relationships between different

gender categories. Still, the collection would be an intellectual and spatial reflection of a certain ideological framework fixed in time. This is an inescapable restriction of library projects.

### Reimagining Library Space

Library space is highly structured and relatively inflexible, bound both by the limits of the language of subject headings and the physicality of linear bookshelves. Gender works in ways virtually antithetical to this space, and yet the library continues to be a space where subjects locate themselves and their identity. What accounts for these unlikely bedfellows?

We are accustomed to thinking of the library as a space containing and ordering books. Users find themselves in the pages located between the covers of a single title. Accompanying every book, however, is the space delineated on either side and around the book on the shelf in an economy that bears a resemblance to Butler's formulation of the excesses constitutive of identity categories. A book on a shelf produces the space taken up by the book, and is also productive of the spaces around it. It is in these interstitial spaces, perhaps, that we can locate the 'home' of gender identity in the library.

These interstitial spaces exist in physical libraries where they do not in virtual information environments. On the Internet, categories and structures are largely opaque to the user. In a physical library, categorical boundaries are clear and the ways linear shelves direct users through the space are physically palpable. If users want to resist the dominant knowledge formations in the library, the spaces of resistance are well-delineated: traverse the shelves between RC and HQ to bring psychological and social constructionist approaches together via physical move-

#### Further Reading and Resources:

- Associated Press. (1952, December 12) Bronx 'boy' is now a girl: Danish treatments change sex of former army clerk. **New York Times**, p. A18.
- Butler, J. (1991) Imitation and gender insubordination. In D. Fuss (ed), **Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories**. New York: Routledge, pp. 13-31.
- Foucault, M. (1977) Fantasia of the library. In D.F. Bouchard (ed) **Language, Counter-Memory, Practice**. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, pp. 87-109.

ment. In virtual environments, the boundaries are less clear and the spatial delineations impenetrable by all but computer programs with access to the largely privatized algorithms that direct users through cyberspace just as surely as libraries structure flow through linear space.

In his discussion of Gustav Flaubert's (1977, 94) *Temptation*, Foucault notes that it is Flaubert's insistence on including 'everything' in his novel that creates the space for "an infinite brood of monsters" that emerge from the text outside of the restrictions of the space of the page or the time of the publication. The library itself is similarly productive. The classification system that orders everything simultaneously produces what stands outside of its categories, allowing the flourishing of excess at the point of control. As Foucault (1977, 91) articulates, "The imaginary is not formed in opposition to reality as its denial or compensation; it grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstices of repetition and commentaries; it is born and takes shape in the interval between books. It is the phenomenon of the library". By reducing work on identity to a handful of highly restricted categories, the library creates the space for a flourishing of identity in the spaces between and among books rather than between individual covers. It is in the interstices where libraries are the queerest of places. ❧

**Emily Drabinski** is an electronic resources and instruction librarian at Long Island University's Brooklyn campus. Her research interests center on articulations of difference in library contexts ranging from classification theory to classroom practice. She sits on the board of **Radical Teacher**, a journal of feminist, socialist, and anti-racist teaching.

**Maeve Hann:** Please see page 43 for artist biography.

## **VOICES RISING: CELEBRATING 20 YEARS OF BLACK LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, & TRANSGENDER WRITING**

Edited by G. Winston James and Other Countries, RedBone Press

This is an exciting and powerful collection of sixty-five emerging and more established black gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender voices from the U.S. It celebrates the twentieth anniversary of Other Countries, an organized writing workshop that originated 15 years ago with the "mission to nurture, disseminate and preserve black gay expression" in the tradition of such writers as James Baldwin, Joseph Beam, Angelina Weld Grimke, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and many others. The poems, short stories, essays, interviews and dramatic excerpts gathered here exemplify the personal, political and cultural complexities of identity, desire, family and community.

## **NOBODY PASSES: REJECTING THE RULES OF GENDER & CONFORMITY**

Edited by Mattilda/Matt Bernstein Sycamore, Seal Press

In this fabulously funny and thought provoking collection of essays, editor Mattilda a.k.a. Matt Bernstein Sycamore, seeks to explode notions of conformity on any level. Interweaving discussions on gender, sexuality and community identities, Mattilda "gleefully demolishes the smug propriety that lurks within most contemporary debates" (Susan Stryker, transgender activist, historian and filmmaker).

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**Maeve Hanna** is a graduate of York University's BFA Honours program. She specialized in Visual Arts and English literature. While at York, Maeve took part in an exchange program with the University of Leeds where she was able to explore her photographic practice and push the boundaries of the photographic medium. Upon returning from Leeds, Maeve won the Site Specific Art Contest at York, which gave her the opportunity to put the work accomplished in Leeds into a large scale mural on display at the Scott Library of York University. Maeve currently works as a Bilingual Educator at Oakville Galleries and is completing a curatorial internship with the Art Gallery of Hamilton. She recently returned from a year abroad in Corsica, France where she taught English in elementary schools.

Here is what the Artist has said about her series (After Claude Cahun) Intervention:

The piece is called (after Claude Cahun) Intervention and comes from a three part self portrait series (also called (after Claude Cahun)) that I worked on while studying abroad at the University of Leeds, UK. The photographs were taken on medium format black and white film at the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds. In the series I explored different spaces in my new surroundings. My initial inspiration for the series was a photograph by French artist Claude Cahun, taken in 1933, where Cahun is portrayed as asleep in a wardrobe. In exploring these spaces (a wardrobe, a window and the library) I wanted to infuse a female figure into a space she had not previously been found in and question the role of the female figure and portraits of women. There are several key elements to be considered in these photographs. The time period is hard to pinpoint, given the antique quality of the Brotherton Library and the attire of the figure. When placed side by side the diagonals of the bookshelves accent the distinct horizontal and vertical lines, which was what drew me to the space. The figure's movements are also unpredictable, which is intriguing in a place where movement is restricted. The images appear as film stills in which the figure moves from one place to another, negotiating a prescribed space, in an unprecedented manner. The images work by emphasizing a new way to negotiate and inscribe a body into a space which is ordinarily used in a much more conventional manner.

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