



Operationalizing Bias

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Editors' Foreword

This piece was originally published in the book *Trans and Gender Diverse Voices in Libraries* (Library Juice Press, 2023), which contains over 50 chapters by trans and gender diverse people involved in library work. The book can be purchased through the [publisher's website](#), and [many chapters](#) can be read for free online.

Two of the editors of the book are on the *Murmurations* editorial board, and we are delighted to include this chapter in the journal. Since the original version was published under a pseudonym, the author did not have the option others did to share the work in an institutional repository, which is a common way to remove the paywall from such works. (We appreciate that Library Juice Press permits authors to completely retain copyright to their works, allowing republishing.) It is a core value of *Murmurations* that our authors control what name, if any, appears on their work; given the topic of the journal in our current environment, anonymity makes it possible to publish safely for many trans and gender diverse people. In the new introduction below, K.R. describes the process of choosing to de-anonymize the piece. We enormously appreciate the trust involved in that decision and are glad to be able to share the work with a wider audience.

Author's Preface

This essay originally started out as an explanation. In the spring of 2013, I was taking a course about problems in classification, where we were required to submit weekly reading responses, which I never enjoyed as either a student or an instructor. As a result of the problems in classification that I was personally experiencing at the time—namely, the ways in which my transness inexplicably led to medical issues and confused classmates—I became markedly unproductive and I was genuinely worried that I would fail the course. After talking about it with my truly fantastic advisor, I submitted an earlier version of this piece to the professor (who is most definitely not the professor described in this essay!) as an attempt to document the ways in which my body had been challenged physically and intellectually. I didn't get any feedback on it, but I did get a decent grade in the class, so I suppose it met my initial goals.

When I submitted the piece for publication, I updated it to describe the process of filing a discrimination complaint against my research methods professor and our subsequent mediation. When the book came out, my (now former, though still wonderful) advisor read it and informed me that the professor never fulfilled his promise to attend the queer and trans sensitivity training sessions on campus. Given that he was a thoroughly privileged full professor, the lack of accountability comes as no surprise.

I initially published this essay using a pseudonym—not because I wasn't out as trans, but because I was ashamed of having struggled so much. I had internalized the neoliberal narrative that the difficulties were all my own fault, but this narrative does not acknowledge the difficulties of being a trans person in higher education (or being a trans person anywhere, really). Trans people are allowed to struggle—and to articulate that struggle—when trying to navigate systems that were never designed for us. This remains true even within a culture where a grad student who admits to any significant difficulty during the degree process runs the risk of being viewed as irrevocably flawed. By coming out as an irrevocably flawed trans person with a PhD, I hope to pose a minuscule threat to that narrative.

Operationalizing Bias

K.R. Roberto

The following text is excerpted from journal entries that I wrote for a course project in 2013, during my first year as a Ph.D. student in a Library and Information Science (LIS) program.

As a trans person who was forcibly assigned female at birth, my gender is not my own. Despite gender being viewed as a social construct, a mere declaration of maleness has never been enough for me to earn its assorted privileges. I require an intramuscular shot of testosterone every other Tuesday to keep my body phenotypically male enough for others to call me “he” and “Mr. Roberto.” I’m relatively fortunate that my hormonally-induced bald spot and patchy facial hair allow my appearance to be classified as male most of the time, although the times that my disguise doesn’t work are incredibly painful.

Before the spring term begins, my body decides to rebel against me; my reproductive system emerges from a four-year hibernation to make its presence visible again. I lived as male for several years before I was deemed mentally healthy enough to start hormone therapy under a doctor’s supervision. That process was an incessantly painful vicious circle: my mental health was suffering because I couldn’t access hormone treatment, but I couldn’t access hormone treatment because my mental health was suffering. I’m amazed by how one medically unexpected event is powerful enough for my emotions to snap right back into that old space. After my anxiety attack finally subsides, I calm down long enough to call my doctor at the student health clinic.

I am very fond of my doctor. As far as I can tell, she is the only doctor at the health center who has attended the campus LGBTQ ally training; she’s certainly the only person I ever see there who is wearing a button that proclaims her to be an ally. Upon checking me in, the nurse practitioner follows the typical routine: she asks me how I am, checks my blood pressure, and asks me the date of my last period. I look surprised and half-jokingly ask what I’m supposed to say. “I don’t know why that question is on the form,” she says, “but it’s here, so I asked it. Sorry about that.” We both laugh uncomfortably as she leaves the room and I wait for my doctor to arrive.

My doctor promptly arrives, and I tell her about my psychological woes and reproductive ailments. She has two pieces of bad news for me: 1) she is referring me to the university’s mental health clinic for psychiatric treatment, and 2) she will have to refer me to the university’s women’s health clinic for a thorough examination that may include a biopsy. The first news item is frustrating, though unsurprising, but the second is devastating. As a general health practitioner, she does not feel that she has the expertise to do a biopsy, even if university regulations allow her to do so.

While acknowledging her valid point, the very idea of entering a women-only space for a painful medical procedure fills me with horror. I teach an on-campus course and am used to seeing former and current students around campus—I can’t go to the main library without running into at least one, it seems, and I occasionally see some on my bus to and from class—but most of my students don’t know that I’m trans. My decision not to reveal this can easily be construed as a textbook example of using my privilege to keep myself safe, which is exactly what it is. (There are more salient parts of my identity that I can never conceal—my sexual

orientation and working-class origins, for example, are near-public knowledge in my department; I am occasionally reminded that my sexual orientation apparently is not a secret to anyone in town, judging by the occasional epithet that obnoxious strangers feel comfortable tossing in my direction.) My doctor is kind enough to validate my anxiety, promises that she will see what can be done to make this biopsy as easy on my psyche as possible, and assures me that she will be in touch. I am clearly a classification problem, and one that appears to have never been an issue before on this campus with over 40,000 students.

Before the appointment ends, I ask her if she has any idea why the nurse practitioner asked me when my last period was. She looks me up in the patient management system, and discovers that my gender is listed as female. "But I thought I changed that!" I exclaim; I graduated from the university years ago under my old name and gender, and spent much of my first semester asking the health center's medical records department to correct my information in their patient database and the pharmacy's database. It turns out that there is yet another database containing my health information. The Internet truly is forever. My doctor tells me that she will contact the director of the medical records department to explain my situation and will let me know if I have to do anything; she now has to speak with at least two of her colleagues about my health care issues. I consider nominating her for sainthood.

While my doctor is busy conducting a guerrilla Trans 101 workshop on my behalf, I start my preparation for the spring semester ahead. I will be taking a mandatory course in research methods, which will turn out to be surprisingly painful. As it is mandatory for second-semester doctoral students, everyone in my Ph.D. cohort has enrolled; this is the second course that we have all taken as a group. Each week, we meet at an oval table. Each week, we sit in the same seats that we've assigned ourselves, the gap between the L and the I in LIS—a concept often mentioned by the instructor of our first mandatory group course—made manifest. The four of us who are particularly interested in critical theory and library work sit together on one side. As the semester goes on, it becomes readily apparent that we four are all too literally surrounded by colleagues who question the validity of our research. Unfortunately, this frequently includes the instructor.

The usual instructor of record for this course is on sabbatical for the school year and as a result, another tenured professor is teaching in their stead. The major assignment for the class will be a fairly lengthy research proposal, the idea being that we can use such a document as the basis for a dissertation proposal when the time comes. The instructor informs us that he has a lot of experience reviewing funding requests for the National Science Foundation (NSF) and can give us insider information on how that entire process works. I briefly find myself wondering what will happen when I share my decidedly non-scientific research interests, but I tell myself to be optimistic for a change. Maybe this class will offer information from a wide variety of perspectives. We watch *The Mystery of Picasso* on the first day of class, which I take as a good sign.

As the weeks go by, the good signs start to disappear. At first, it's difficult to say how much of this is based on the instructor's own inclinations and how much is due to student participation; after a while, the distinction ceases to exist or to really matter. We spend a lot of time discussing what factors make research worthwhile: it needs to have a high impact factor, identify something that is previously unknown, and be replicable. The only way to prove impact is with statistics. Everything has to be logical and empirical. For three hours a week,

we enter a world where Big Data and text mining are the prized gold standards, and all worthwhile data must be machine-extracted. I joke to a friend that I am going to start typing it as "BIG DATA" to emphasize its utmost importance; he jokes back that he will start using "lis" (as opposed to LIS) to make the new priorities in our field as visible as possible.

As time goes on, this joke gets a little less funny, especially when we begin working on our research proposals, which we are expected to review and revise throughout the term. The format for this assignment is roughly modeled on an NSF grant application; our proposals follow a similar template, but stop short of actual requests for funding. In a surprisingly literal interpretation of peer review, we will be discussing each other's proposals during class; each student will leave the room while their work is being critiqued. Each student is assigned three different proposals to officially review, leading and summarizing the discussion for one of them. We are asked to leave our names off of our written reviews (which seems an odd request, given that a matrix of assigned reviewers has been posted), and to make copies for all of our classmates to read.

For this first round, our instructor informs us that we only need to submit an informal rough draft; one or two pages will do. I take the research statement that I used when applying to this program and clean it up to some extent. My research agenda concerns subject classification for materials about marginalized populations; my basic argument is that if the labels we use to describe information about people don't match the labels that they would use, we have a problem. This is basically an analysis of library subject headings from a poststructuralist perspective, an effort to interrogate the power balances that are created and constantly validated when we classify oppressed groups. I choose to focus on queer and trans people because I think that my research will be most effective if it hits me where I live. In an attempt to give my classmate reviewers something measurable, I propose that I will create a subject thesaurus for trans and queer identities. I know that my classmates don't have much experience with classification research, but I hope that I can manage to get my point across nonetheless.

Even though I only have to review three, I decide to read all of my classmates' research proposals—partly out of genuine interest, and partly to see how my proposal-writing ability matches up with theirs. Most of them have gone well over the two-page limit, submitting fairly formal proposals with statistics and citations. I immediately panic: does the phrase "rough draft" mean something different to doctoral students? Is this a test? Have I failed? After I calm down about the formatting, I finally do a close reading of the proposals' content. A substantial number of the proposals deal with BIG DATA and text mining in some way or another, which is unsurprising. My fellow critical theory admirers have submitted ideas that also handle marginalized populations; of course, I find these other three proposals the most interesting.

Reviewing these proposals proves to be a difficult task on several levels. Are we to decide if our classmates' research is worth conducting at all, or should we analyze how well they present their research ideas? I decide that everyone's research is worth conducting, and I try to offer criticisms on how to strengthen the actual proposals. *Go into further detail about your methodology*, I write. *Can you contextualize this within the field of LIS?* It never occurs to me to question if someone's research is valuable in the first place; I'm a colleague and a classmate, not the course instructor, and I'm not interested in power trips.

Once we actually discuss these proposals in class, it turns out that we all have wildly divergent ideas of what the review process should entail. We spend twenty to thirty minutes dissecting each other's work in relentless detail, whether we know anything about their research area or not. After three BIG DATA-intensive proposals in a row are discussed, I decide to stop prolonging the inevitable and leave the room for my turn. I have to wait for the discussion to be summarized in writing before I know what anyone has said, but I can hazard a guess, especially after hearing the critiques of a proposal to study institutionalized racism in academic libraries: *This proposal needs to operationalize racism; what happens if it turns out that institutionalized racism isn't embedded in librarianship at all?* This is the point in the class when it finally hits me: those of us working with oppressed groups of people are repeatedly being asked to justify our interests, and the instructor has no plans to change the conversation. I have a sudden urge to leave and never come back.

After class, I ask a couple of my classmates to tell me what the discussion about my proposal entailed. They inform me that the professor suggested that I incorporate straight, non-trans people as a control group, an idea that leaves me utterly bewildered. I also learn that a classmate who is also queer became so frustrated with the discussion about my work that they had to leave the room. It sounds like my initial assessment was sadly accurate. The actual written feedback follows the trajectory that I've come to expect: *Is there a way to demonstrate that this is a problem? Are only LGBTQ users having problems searching for information on queer or gender non-conforming topics? Could this study contribute to FRBR?* I entertain the idea of answering their questions with more questions: How do we document the act of inaction? If users cannot find materials about their own identities, isn't that indicative of a problem? How does a conceptual model for bibliographic description relate to inaccurate language in subject headings? I realize that while just a few of my classmates use the critical theory that I want to apply, even fewer of them seem to have much experience working with controlled vocabularies. I start to wonder what I'm supposed to be getting out of this work.

I seem to have a lot of trouble seeing what I'm supposed to get out of anything I'm doing these days. During my first visit with my new psychiatrist, he expresses alarm at the cocktail of medications that I've been on for several years. The medication that I take for my ADHD has some particularly nasty neurological interactions with another medication of mine. He suggests that I stop the ADHD medication and try something new—something that the university's pharmacy doesn't cover and will require me to pay out of pocket. He says the drug manufacturer offers a coupon for a free 30-day prescription so I should try it and see how I feel. The local pharmacy takes five days to fill this prescription because it is a special order. When I go to pick it up, I idly ask the pharmacist how much this scrip would cost if I were paying for it. The figure is the same as my monthly rent, yet another hilariously absurd example of the need for universal health care. I take it for a few days and notice no effect besides a massive headache, so I stop. Life as a grad student with uncontrolled ADHD is not as exciting as it might sound. All I do is worry obsessively about the work that I need to do and sleep at odd hours to get away from the worrying. By the middle of the semester, I am hopelessly behind in everything, finding that it takes me hours and hours to write anything, even a 500-word essay on a topic that is very familiar to me. I start setting alarms so I can get up early and work on my course assignments; every Monday morning, I shrug and fall back asleep.

In the research methods class, we are taking a break from discussing our research agendas to discuss those of faculty members in our department. We each interview a professor about

their intellectual history and methodologies, and report back to the class. I watch a classmate laugh as they recount how the professor they spoke with had once accidentally attended a conference program about human-computer interaction from a feminist perspective—gasp! – and found himself grudgingly admitting that these feminist researchers were making the same types of arguments he was; his sexism is presented as a lovable foible. The instructor smiles indulgently.

Meanwhile, I've heard back from my general doctor. After speaking with a colleague, they have worked out a way that I can check in at the regular clinic desk and then be sent to the women's health clinic with no one the wiser. Additionally, she and her colleague have discussed my situation and chosen to spare me the horrible pain of an internal biopsy; instead, I will have a marginally less uncomfortable ultrasound. She knows that this is the equivalent of offering me a firing squad with four rifles instead of six, but it's the best she can do. Everything is ready to go as soon as my schedule allows it.

Armed with this knowledge, I let six weeks pass before I call the clinic back to schedule the appointment. I tell myself that this is because I just keep forgetting to call, which is partly true; of course, my mental health issues play a larger role than I'm willing to admit, but the largest unnamed culprit is my own custom blend of self-hatred. The archetypical trans narrative classifies physical transition as successful when a person is frequently assumed to be cisgender. Due to a combination of luck, various forms of privilege, and some disposable income several years ago, I have had chest surgery and am on hormone therapy, so my body looks pretty phenotypically male—unless (or until) someone sees me naked. While that qualifier is a pretty substantial one, the vast majority of my daily interactions with other people require all of us to be clothed, so it is generally within my power to disclose my gender identity at will. This type of medical care can easily remove that agency, which makes me worry that I will be treated poorly by health care professionals; this worry comes from my lived experiences, and is more of an expectation than anything else. My inability to distinguish between my fears and my expectations is where my own transphobia resides.

The day of the ultrasound arrives. I bring a friend for support. Everything happens exactly as my doctor said it would: I check in with the same receptionist as I always do, and a nurse surreptitiously leads me up the stairs to a side entrance for the "women's" health clinic. Everyone is perfectly respectful and nonchalant about the process, which is indeed incredibly painful, but is otherwise a complete non-event. As usual, I was worried about the wrong thing.

In the research methods class, it's time for us to submit the second drafts of our research proposals, which are supposed to incorporate the feedback we received from the first round. Having received very little useful feedback, I decide to just make every section longer. In addition to thesaurus construction, I add a new goal of interviewing metadata workers about their classification practices. I add a couple of stories from frustrated library workers about searching for "queer" in their catalogs and finding nothing relevant. I mention an IFLA report in an attempt to demonstrate that improving subject access is important and has high impact. I have no idea if this is what I am supposed to do, but I have to do *something*.

This round of discussions is not particularly different from the first, except that I receive even less feedback from my classmates. Here is the entirety of the written feedback: I should state the core issues more explicitly. Additionally, I should expand my work's impact beyond the

IFLA report I cited and operationalize FRBR. That's all. This second comment leads me to conclude that most of my classmates do not know what FRBR is, let alone its relationship to subject classification, though they do seem to know what "operationalizing" is, so they're one up on me in that regard. A few of my friends in the class confirm what I suspected about the class discussion: the students assigned to review my work seemed unprepared and did not appear to fully grasp the idea of transphobic subject headings. It isn't until weeks later that I learn that the professor used the incorrect pronouns for me during this discussion; it isn't until later yet that I learn that he has *repeatedly* used the incorrect pronouns despite being corrected by others. I'm not sure why this act feels like such a betrayal—the course has been racist, heteronormative, and cissexist, so what's a little overt transphobia?—but it genuinely does. Due to the privileges that I describe above, many of the students in my department do not know that I am trans, and being called "she" against my will and consent is not a way that I want them to find out.

The BIG DATA/critical theory divide in the class grows even more pronounced once we start to discuss any type of qualitative method. The information scientists choose to express their discomfort with qualitative methods by repeatedly mentioning their distrust of anything that isn't replicable or measurable. *How are you supposed to do research based on talking to a group of people one time? Humanities research has a low impact factor.* During one class, I find myself trying to explain that there is no true objectivity in any kind of research because human beings can't be truly objective; we all bring our own perspectives with us. My outburst is mostly ignored, and I curse myself for not being articulate enough to start any sort of discussion, nor witty enough to offer Irigaray-inspired mimetic rejoinders to their dismissiveness.

My medical issues continue unabated. The ultrasound did not reveal any abnormalities, meaning that my medical issues are idiopathic; I grimly amuse myself by facetiously conceptualizing my body as a space of resistance that denatures the category of "trans male." I keep meaning to call my psychiatrist to discuss my medication options, but I only remember to do so when the clinic is closed and I can't actually call them. I continue to sleep and worry, rousing long enough to work on my annual student review. The meeting goes well, even though I confess to the two members of my committee that I am woefully behind in my coursework due to writer's block. They are sympathetic and offer useful suggestions that I promptly forget to try. My progress towards the degree is found to be satisfactory, and I wait for the Doctoral Studies Committee to examine my annual review documentation and make their own decision.

Consumed with mounting guilt and anxiety over my incomplete assignments, I email my research methods professor to inform him that I am aware that this is an issue and that I am working to resolve it. He asks me to meet with him at a local coffee shop to discuss this further, and we schedule an informal meeting for the end of the week. I mention this to my advisor, who asks me if I would like them to come to the meeting. I decide to go alone, and we arrange to have a debriefing afterwards.

Our meeting is under an hour, and my instructor is friendly and avuncular; we spend part of the time chatting about the title of the book I've just checked out: *"Raw Data" Is an Oxymoron*, an anthology edited by Lisa Gitelman. He can't understand why I'm having such trouble doing the work when I've been published before, so I confess my undermedication saga. He then tells me that my writing and course participation show an unwillingness to step out of my

comfort zone and that he wants me to put myself “out there,” because that is what getting a Ph.D. is all about. He then tells me that my comments on the difference between postmodernism and anti-foundationalism (namely, that I have no idea if there is a difference) make me sound as if I don’t know what I’m talking about and am choosing to namedrop instead.

I nod and agree with him, because I’m afraid to speak truth to power. I can’t bring myself to tell him that, these days, just showing up to class feels like putting myself out there. That making any comment in class that isn’t a joke or a request for clarification makes me feel no less vulnerable than having an internal ultrasound does. That the antagonistic class discussions create a toxic environment and his inaction feels like an endorsement. That I feel defeated. I don’t tell him that some of the information science students in the course have taken to telling my partners in critical theory that their work isn’t situated in LIS and they shouldn’t be here. The fact that my white male privilege has kept me from being critiqued in the same way is painfully salient, but I see no purpose in mentioning this to a full professor who is even more steeped in white male privilege than I am. I apologize for falling behind, promise that I will get my work done, and quickly retreat to my advisor’s office to debrief.

When I get there, they inform me that my instructor sent a letter to them and to the chair of the Doctoral Studies Committee stating his grave concerns about my success in the program because I haven’t participated enough in class and am far behind in my assignments. He wants this information to appear in my annual review; however, he didn’t send the letter until after the submission deadline for annual reviews had already passed. My advisor assures me that this does not mean that I will be kicked out of the program. We discuss steps that I can take to get some work done. I cry in their office out of pure embarrassment. They assure me that I am not the only student in this course who is struggling, and I am not the only one who is behind in the assignments. I don’t know if I am the only student who has been flagged in this fashion, though I can hazard a guess.

My advisor suggests that my instructor seems to be unfairly targeting me, an idea that genuinely hadn’t crossed my mind. I have been chalking up his exclusionary views of gender and sexuality to benign, if obviously frustrating, cluelessness. If he is singling me out, it’s because I’m behind in my work, so I must deserve it. I begin to realize how much of the class discourse, both spoken and not, I have internalized. Due to my own experiences, it is easiest for me to minimize the poisonous classroom environment, to classify it as a product of my own actions or inactions. Taking the easiest path, however, is exactly the type of behavior that I want to threaten with my research, and with my approach to classification in general: if we continue to follow inaccurate and painful systems without question, we reinforce our own oppression. We will never be able to use the act of description for social change if we do not disrupt the traditional descriptive process.

Epilogue

With my advisor’s assistance, I reported my professor’s behavior as bias-based harassment to the university’s office of inclusion. In late 2013, that office moderated a meeting between the professor and me; the most memorable part of the meeting was when he said, “I knew you were transgender, but I didn’t know which way!” (If it weren’t for the journal entries included above, this is the only thing that I would ever remember his saying to me.) The office mandated that he attend the university’s LGBTQ and trans ally training sessions—since I never

spoke to him again, I have no idea if he actually did.

I got a B-minus in his course. I later wrote my dissertation on the topic I presented in class; it was defended successfully with no revisions.

The LIS program that I attended now includes out trans students in both the Master's and Ph.D. levels. I hope that their experiences do not mirror mine.