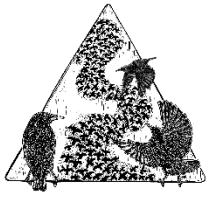
Murmurations



A Trans & Gender Diverse Library Journal

# Reflections of a Non-Binary Asian American in LIS

Alvina Lai

**Keywords**

Asian American, Chinese American, non-binary, early career librarian, tokenization

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## Author's Preface

Originally published in 2023, this piece was for the student or professional who, like me, existed at a unique intersection of identities. I was a digital librarian then, early in my career, and I wanted to try something new (like writing a book chapter!). The result was part guide, part narrative, part checklist. It was written in hopes that the world would change.

Three years later, the world did change, but it also stayed the same. Discrimination is still a problem, and in some ways it is worse. When the opportunity to re-share this text came about in 2026, it made sense to say yes.

In the same bracket of time, my role and responsibilities evolved. I continue to work with information, but I'm doing other things too. I still call myself a librarian and that is true in many ways. That said, I found it best to leave the piece mostly untouched. The text is mostly as-is, to preserve a message that was crafted when LIS was closer, in the day-to-day.

As it was then, as it is now. The piece is for those who exist in this place, of librarianship and identity. Take what you want and need from it. It is for you.

## 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. Because we see gender as intertwined with other social structures such as race, ability, and class/caste, we are particularly interested in publishing pieces that use an intersectional lens as they address trans and gender diverse topics in library and information science. May this piece be one of many for us and our field to learn from in *Murmurations*.

## Reflections of a Non-Binary Asian American in LIS

Alvina Lai

### Intro

*Note: In the attempt to make the writing as accessible as possible, the author strived to only reference sources that were open access (OA), or accessible at public libraries. In addition, in the interest of uplifting underrepresented scholars, the author strived to only cite Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) and/or gender diverse voices.*

This text is for the non-binary Asian Americans in LIS. I'm writing for you so you can compare notes, add to your inventory, and take what you need during your journey through the profession.

This is how I ended up in LIS. I was raised in Brooklyn by immigrant, Cantonese-speaking relatives. Helicopter grandparents bubble-wrapped their grand "daughter" by sheltering me from the dangers of cable TV, playdates, and the general outside world. Instead, I did homework, read books, and helped with the laundry. Then came high school. In a wild act of teen rebellion, I secretly applied to an art college in Manhattan. I enrolled without permission (got into so much trouble) and plunged head-first into the wild, unaware that I was about to enter a different society an hour's train ride away.

Bewildered by change (as one often is), I fumbled through undergrad with stunted social skills and complete naivety of white American pop culture. The world outside of the Chinese enclave of Brooklyn travelled on a different orbit. In the eyes of (mostly white, middle-class) college peers, I was moneyless, Asian, and awkward. I was a hermit crab changing its shell, and every so often the shell was crushed under someone's heel.

At the same time, art school in NYC in the 2010s was also a time of exploration. Non-binary and demisexual were added to my vocabulary and I practiced describing myself with those words. I bookmarked them for later—I was too busy with classes and trying to make enough money for the next monthly tuition payment. After completing undergrad, I worked in a university fundraising office, where I encountered database management for the first time. I wanted a promotion, so I went right back to school to build my technical (and social) skills. While in library school, I joined LIS associations, met people, and volunteered. I bounced between academic, non-profit, and corporate positions. I veered from database management to digital archiving to digital asset management (DAM). In 2021, almost a year after graduating and during an international pandemic, I started in a corporate DAM librarian position. On my first day, I added "they/them" to my email signature.

My name is Alvina and I'm a non-binary Chinese American. This is the mapping of my experience in LIS, and these are the practical lessons I learned along the way. I hope my journey can be useful to you as you go forward on your own path in the field.

### Tokens and Monoliths

If you are open about your gender identity in the workplace, you might be conscripted into being "the expert." Chinese-American clinical psychologist Sand Chang sarcastically says, "As a nonbinary person, I am expected to be a spokesperson for all the transgender and gender nonconforming people across the land!!!" That's not your burden. As Chang describes, "This is a responsibility that I do not want, and it's a position of power that I should not be given."[1]

You may also be unwillingly conscripted into conversations as The Asian. Peers may pop their head over your cubicle half-wall and say, "Do Asians really x?", "How do you pronounce this Asian name?", "How do you say x in your Asian language?" The Asian American experience is not a monolith. Resist the urge to try to summarize whole cultures into one sentence. Resist the instinct to people-please. Resist the tokenization. Resist.

**Co-Existing**

In 2017, I received an email from my mother with some career advice:

> You are too young to know what future will be when you see yourself as part minor group, but I am observing this everyday. I have coworker who is 'he' told me in tears that she couldn't find job for a long time because she dress up like man. Maybe some law will protest [protect] them, but in realty, business and majority are refused to accept them. People like them may find job in west village, but it is hard for them find job at up east side or west side. If you want to achieve your career dream in these areas, think about it seriously…
>
> Dear alvina, it is painful to see that you are going to chose a way that would hurt you deeply and we as Chinese parents couldn't help you to avoid from what is happening. Please listen to us, people in New York are living in different life, some easy, some difficult, who want to chose difficult one? Not smart people.

We no longer talk.

People try to tell us who we are and who we are not. To survive, we learn to navigate and negotiate our identities. We compromise. We learn to engage with the egos of our office-mates, teammates, professors, managers, directors, committee members, co-authors, colleagues, clients, patrons, everyone. We learn to co-exist.

**Communities**

When I entered LIS, I was advised to find my library family. After all, "Members of marginalized groups, especially people of color and those who identify as LGBTQ+ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus], experience hidden workloads, microaggressions, early burnout and lower retention."[2] There are librarians of color who had those experiences—

they've written about it, created communities because of it.[3] There are trans and gender variant librarians who have also created communities, like the Trans and Gender Diverse LIS Network, as well as resources like Que(e)ry, which brings "attention and support to hidden queer collections, and to provide a fun social space for queer librarians (and all who love them)."[4] These communities do the essential work of sustaining their LIS constituents.

So where do we fit among these different library communities? As non-binary Asian Americans, we exist at an intersection that requires nuance. Jayden Thai, a psychologist and queer trans man of color, explains,

> Trans API [Asian Pacific Islander] individuals may have to negotiate between their trans identity (influenced by U.S. individualistic cultural values) and their API identities (influenced by API collectivistic cultural values). In addition to balancing cultural values and spaces, trans API individuals also encounter double discrimination from their communities such as racism from their predominantly White trans and queer communities and transphobia from their API families and communities.[5]

When society sees identities as separate buckets, we have to navigate the empty spaces between them. Here's an example. In 2020, a (Chinese-American) relative connected me with a university staff member for an informational interview. The calendar read: "Ms. Alvina Lai." If I asked the university staff member for a correction, my relative might find out. And that would cause drama. So, I didn't. When the personal and the professional collide, when different social expectations clash, there is identity negotiation.

Thai's research states: "They noted not feeling like they belonged in either the trans community as an API person or their API culture of origin due to being a trans person."[6] Here's an example of this phenomenon at work. At one organization, I was encouraged to join some company groups. There was a LGBTQ+ community group. Will I be the only person of color (POC)? The company also had an Asian heritage community group. Will I be the only non-binary individual? These concerns are part of identity negotiation. We reflect, weigh, negotiate.

Is there a way to understand this experience? Vani Natarajan, a queer South Asian American librarian, explores this.[7] They talk about the queer and transgender people of color (QTPOC) identity. They explain that QTPOC LIS workers develop forms of capital, or abundances, to sustain themselves in library spaces. Two forms of abundances are familial abundance and resistant abundance. We generate familial abundance by creating communities to support one another. We generate resistant abundance when we develop reactions to inequality.

Inequality varies for different people. Our experiences as QTPOC are different from white people (including LGBTQ+ white people). Our experiences as QTPOC are different from POC who are not queer or trans. Even among QTPOC, there is a range of experiences, such as those which are specific to Asian Americans. When we are in communities created for one

identity, our other identity may be ignored or shunned. From what Natarajan's saying, it sounds like QTPOC need to, and do, create their own.

Creating a community is a long process, one that requires bravery, energy, and persistence. Even with a library family, there is still the day-to-day grind in the office. What does it mean to be a non-binary Asian American when serving patrons, when sitting in meetings, when writing literature? The way one dresses and is seen, speaks and is heard, writes and is read—these are all part of co-existing.

**Dress Code**

When people and popular media think of librarians and dress codes, they think of the cardigan. Cardigans and items of dress are often gendered, based on the gender binary system. That can make it difficult for LIS workers whose gender expressions don't fit into that system.

My dress is androgynous. Androgyny is ambiguous and deliciously indifferent. Unfortunately, some people (stores and websites too) still think of fashion as "men's" or "women's" wear. Just as white supremacy normalizes whiteness to create a harmful othering of POC folx, masculinity is normalized as the default gender expression and creates harmful othering of non-masculine gender expressions. This distracts from the charm of androgyny, and puts androgyny on this gender expression scale of more or less masculine.

For non-binary folx, androgyny may almost seem like a mandatory uniform. As Chang describes it, when they dress in femme clothes,

> I won't be seen as 'trans enough' – my clothes will give people permission to treat me as a woman or feel entitled to use the wrong pronouns. Even people who claim to be accepting of non-binary gender still expect that our expression must deviate from the norms associated with our sex assigned at birth.[8]

It's one thing to be in androgynous dress because it is what I want, and another thing to dress that way because it is expected. I remind myself that I don't need outward performance of my gender and choices of gender expression. I can adopt any kind of dress and still be a nonbinary person regardless of what people think I am.

There's one more thing about androgynous dress: it's different when you're Asian. No matter how I dress, I'm navigating stereotypes (and racist histories) victimizing Asian American bodies. For example, when Chinese laborers came to the U.S. in the 1800s to build the nation's Transcontinental Railroad, it made white men insecure—as a result, white workers directed violent, racist, and emasculating attacks at Chinese men, which we still see today. Meanwhile, Asian women in American history were "hyper-sexualized yet demure and submissive… This stereotype in turn fostered the over-prevalence of Asian women in pornography, the mail-order bride phenomenon, the Asian fetish syndrome, and worst of all,

sexual violence against Asian women."[9] The violence is still visible and present. In 2021, eight people, including six Asian women, were killed in anti-Asian hate crime shootings. Tie sexualization and submissiveness with any service industry (like a service desk?), and the situation reveals how vulnerable we can be.

What does that have to do with dress codes in LIS? Well, in the above, stereotypes of Asian men and women assume a binary. That itself is a problem. In a digital asset management system, a photo of me might get tagged as "Asian" and "woman," in which image tagging is another whole can of worms. More importantly, I don't want to displace the conversations about stereotypes of Asian men and women. How do I dress in an androgynous way without perpetuating the harmful stereotypes of the effeminate Asian man? How do I dress in a way that does not get misinterpreted as dismissing the struggles of Asian women? Can I be myself without silencing others?

Can I wear cardigans?

Ultimately, dress codes are problematic; everyday gendered language around dress is problematic. It's uncomfortable. Discomfort is both physical and emotional. Instead, I consider dress as a form of communication and a factor of comfort. I can never control how others interpret my communication. All I can control is how I express myself to the best of my physical, emotional, and financial ability.

**Spoken Voice**

In 2018, I went in-person to volunteer at an archive. Volunteers were invited to provide their pronouns during introductions. The majority used he/him or she/her. By the time it was my turn, near the end, folx were zoned out. Through the gray silence, I said, "My name is Alvina. My pronouns are they/them." Heads swerved. Faces. I paused. Silence.

My voice has a higher pitch, thus perceived as feminine and young. On calls with interviewers or new colleagues, I'm often "Miss." I've attempted to lower my voice down to a vocal fry, but that was unsustainable. I realized I was trying to be "trans enough" so I stopped. I realized I don't have to perform for anyone.

In conversations, people sometimes do a mid-sentence edit. "Hertheir", "She-their", "hers-theirs." "It's thems-theirs." "Excuse me." "Sorry." Once, I was held back at the end of a meeting—I thought I was in trouble, but the speaker actually wanted to apologize for misgendering me. I responded, "Thank you, I appreciate it." It was a little awkward, since I was the reason for someone going out of their way, but it was also my right to be recognized for who I am. Plus, it's charming in that one could see the speaker's mind rewiring, internalizing new speaking patterns into normalcy. It's unfortunate that it isn't already normal, but it will be.

If a speaker redirects mid-conversation to (over) apologize and self-berate about misgendering you, be careful. It may suck energy from you. You might feel pressured to have to forgive them, and actually console them, even though you are the victim. Resist. There is already a lot of emotional labor in LIS—don't bear this additional burden. Be workplace appropriate, but don't be afraid to redirect them. "I appreciate it. Thank you. Let's return to our tasks." Don't get pulled into their ego whirlpool.

When I refer to myself in the third person, I sometimes mistakenly use "she." I don't intend for it to happen. It's a habit. I'm also rewiring. I forgive people and myself, and move on.

The best moments are when pronouns are used right. "This is Alvina, they're my classmate." "This is Alvina, they're our new librarian." They're! Simple, easy, satisfying.

What about silence? Silence occurs when misgendering goes uncorrected. "She'll be working on the project." Tumbleweeds. These moments are awkward, but can be resolved. If you have an ally in the office, they can follow up with, "They'll be a good addition to the project." I've witnessed self-championing colleagues interject mid-conversation, "Excuse me, my pronouns are they/them."

When I am being misgendered, I may not volunteer a correction. I find it easier to correct the misgendering of someone else, but not myself. Trans and gender diverse folx get accused of being attentionseeking, of being trans "trenders". It is not that the squeaky wheel will get its grease; rather, it is that a nail that sticks out will get hit. I'm not a wheel but a nail. I felt looming self-doubt, anxiety, and insecurity. By speaking out, am I seeking attention? Am I being problematic? I am. I'm in a downward spiral. I forget that it was someone else who made the mistake. No, I'm making the mistake, for causing problems. Why did I say something?

It's uncomfortable to be misgendered. But the discomfort of gender dysphoria didn't temper or cure the anxiety of imposter syndrome. Instead, they co-existed, contradictory and present.

To be clear, every non-binary individual has their own history and reaction to misgendering. Some non-binary folx express anger, irritation, frustration, and exhaustion. I tend to feel discomfort which dissipates, or resignation. The body is temporary. However, I occasionally feel shame for not speaking up, not because of the misgendering to me specifically, but because misgendering could be inflicted upon another person, and I didn't do anything to stop it.

During a symposium, a lovely poster titled, "Addressing the Transgender and Non-Binary User Experience in an Academic Library" was presented. The presenters described updates to their identification fields, changing bathroom signs, etc. Heads bobbed in agreement. Then it was the time for Q&A. A participant came forward. She (she clearly declared) wouldn't want to be called an "it." Gasps. Silence. Glances. The presenters, their faces expressing the

same shock I felt, began to explain the pronouns. In discomfort, I left. Maybe I should have stayed, to witness and understand how these situations are (or aren't) resolved.

Like prefixes and gender-related words, names can be verbalized incorrectly. After the 2021 Atlanta shootings, a wave of media coverage by non-Asian news anchors, journalists, and public figures attempted to pronounce the victims' names. Due to the cultural ignorance of American media, some sources misspelled or shortened the names into something unrecognizable. Name butchering is not new for the Asian American community. Names get butchered during conferences, panel introductions, graduations, in-office meetings, virtual calls. It's disrespectful and tiring.

Fortunately, there is a fix. It shouldn't be your responsibility, but you can encourage folx to ask for name pronunciations, and then give it to them. Here's an example from an email from the Visual Resources Association: "Please take a moment to respond to this email with a phonetic pronunciation of your name so we can say it as you do."

Words can confuse people. Confusion can make people defensive and hostile. Their fear and insecurity are not your fault and not for you to manage. It is not your responsibility, or your power, to control how other people feel. They don't get to control how you feel, either.

There are practical actions you can take in the office. For example, build prefixes, pronunciation fields, and inclusive options into templates, forms, and surveys. Update policies, documentation, standards, and procedures. Add it as a bullet point for the next one-on-one check-in with your manager. Take a look at any database fields. In 2020, I worked with a database where the standards stated, clearly, that Mx. was not a replacement or placeholder.

What else? Add international holidays and monthly celebrations to the office calendar. Seek out those who contemplate and celebrate with you—find your support and ask them for help. An organization's inclusiveness can be reflected in its processes, but its processes can indicate, and change, workplace culture. It sounds aggressive, but in the bigger picture, this is just institutional growth, and you're fostering positive change as a diligent and insightful LIS worker.

If you come up against complicated bureaucracy, I find purposeful, persistent, and positive communication to be key. Changes can take months, at the director's quarterly or bi-annual meeting. Record all your efforts. If you hear a "no," you have two choices: you can keep trying until you burn out (maybe you'll make a dent of a difference and that would be worth your while), or you can take it as permission to start your job search. At your exit interview, cite "lacking diversity" as an issue, and tell them you tried. Your tone is professional, but you have your receipts. You deserve a place where you and your work can be appreciated.

**Digital Identity**

The first word on my resume is Mx. In whole, the first line says Mx. Alvina Lai. To use a self-determined prefix/salutation is a simple yet effective moment of empowerment. Hiring managers will make gendered and ethnic assumptions based on names anyway, so this will clarify preconceptions from the start. Though once at an interview, I was asked what my legal name was (the interviewer thought "Mx. Alvina" was my artistic name). Amused, I explained it was my gender identity and they said, "Oh, thank you!"

My email signature includes "they/them." At one company, the employer provided a signature template that linked to mypronouns.org. Despite my signature, I'm often referred to as "she" or "her'' in emails and chats. Nonetheless, I continue this practice because it may empower someone else who sees it.

The biography statement; a lot of unexpected edits can happen here. The first occurrence was early in my career, when I submitted a bio for an organization's social media caption. The editor changed "they" to "she," which I saw when the post went live.

Uncomfortable with the change, I started to avoid pronouns in my bios. "Alvina Lai, Title. Responsible for X, Y, and Z. Attended Institutions." At one office, the proofreader recommended I start sentences with "She." I said no.

Avoidance only works for a while, because it eventually makes things awkward. This is true in life, and also in writing bios. As I increased my professional development engagements, the bios became longer. I returned to the third person. "Alvina Lai is the Librarian at New Company. They previously worked at Old Companies." However, with more text, there is more potential for unexpected edits. In 2019, I submitted my bio to a library association only to have it returned with red strikes. "They" have once again become "she." I was puzzled; my heart sank. I turned to Library Twitter, expressing bafflement.

Remember what I said about communities, how they're supportive? Here's an example. Minutes after my post, LIS colleagues came to my support, aid, and defense. Many folx were surprised; some folx were angry on my behalf, others sympathetic. The allyship and solidarity disbersed the gloomy cloud over my head. With clarity, I crafted a response email. I simply explained my pronouns, and the editor wrote an email back with an apology. The bio was retained and my relationship with the editor, to this day, is positive.

The most impactful piece of digital identity is the thoughtful (oftentimes scholarly) text. For most of American history, the only "important" texts were those written by white cisgender men (usually about white cisgender men). Articles, journals, books, etc. were often inaccessible. Now, it's a little bit easier. There are texts about the history of Asian Americans in literature and LIS.[10] There are texts about being queer and Asian American.[11] More text is becoming accessible online. These texts become impactful because they can be read, and also because they can be cited. Scholar Sara Ahmed states, "Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow."[12] The process of

writing and citing from writers of our own communities is empowering. For example, now you know about all the folx cited in this piece of writing. You can see the history of this work, and it gives you somewhere to go next.

**Future**

There are two things you need to bring with you into LIS. First, bring yourself. That's the easiest and hardest thing to do. You always have it with you, but sometimes you can forget you're there. Your environment can trick you into thinking you need permission from peers, managers, or institutions to affirm you and your work. Don't be deceived. In college, I wasted so much time, money, and energy (all of which I had humble quantities of) trying to get external validation for an internal insecurity. It was financially and emotionally draining. LIS will ask of you the same. I learned to see and take care of myself, and was glad I did, because I needed to see and take care of myself a lot in the field.

The second thing you need is your support, or a plan to get support. While you are always empowered to love yourself, it is easier when you have folx to help when things get hard. I found friends in my cohort, on Library Twitter, and in various LIS associations. These are the people who will support you during difficult times. They will talk about issues you may feel afraid or insecure to have alone. They helped me find energy to launch into new endeavors. Look for the people who can relate to your fears, uncertainties, and frustrations, and see you beneath it all. Self-validation is energy, and support is momentum and direction. You'll need both in LIS.

There are tasks ahead. We are the present and future of QTPOC in LIS. Let's sustain communities, create resources, foster growth and self-love. I look forward to seeing you.

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