Mediating Queer and Trans Pasts: The Homosaurus as Queer Information Activism

Marika Cifor & K.J. Rawson

Mediating Queer and Trans Pasts: The Homosaurus as Queer Information Activism

Marika Cifor [iD][a] and K.J. Rawson [iD][b]

[a]Information School, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA; [b]English and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA

ABSTRACT

Libraries and archives have long been rich sites of exploration for LGBTQ+ people in search of self-understanding, identification, shared experience, and community. Yet the information infrastructures that guide every quest for queer and trans information remain silently powerful mediators of our research processes. Through an extended discussion of the Homosaurus, an international LGBTQ linked data vocabulary that the authors helped to develop, this article explores how queer information activism can confront the impoverished tools available for describing queer and trans resources. By focusing on both "corrective" and "analytic" strategies, the authors argue that the Homosaurus must work to expand the queer and trans terminology available for subject description while still challenging the structure and process of classificatory systems as always in tension with our queer aspirations.

A familiar scene takes place across queer coming-of-age narratives … going to the library to look up the thing you suspect you might be, or might desire. This everyday excursion becomes a palm-sweating event when the information sought is also the locus of shame and a host of other bad feelings: the thing you have been called or the thing you fear. The bibliographic encounter is anxious, exciting, and often remembered as a decisive moment, one where mediation is key. (McKinney, 2018, p. 55)

The budding young queer browsing the library catalog and searching its stacks to find themselves is such a familiar scene that it has become an established trope. For queer and trans people, this is a profound, 'palm-sweating event' because of the precarity of our present lives and our histories, often sources of pride and shame. The digital corollary – browsing Google, YouTube, or another platform – has no less transformative power, though the experience may feel less social and public (Drushel, 2010; Hardy, 2021; Lovelock, 2019; Rawson, 2014). Yet, this impactful process of self-discovery and identification is, as Cait McKinney reminds us in the epigraph, always mediated. From library stacks to online searches, queer and trans pasts are mediated by the information infrastructures

that organize, describe, and construct those pasts to make them accessible to users. Information infrastructures construct rhetorical arguments that facilitate particular interpretations of their resources (Feinberg, 2010). One key component of information infrastructures is subject headings, terms assigned to a resource based on its topic (as interpreted by an information professional) to help researchers discover items they seek. When we search a library or archives' catalog, subject terms assigned to a book, archival collection, article or other resource determine whether it is likely to be retrieved. Subject terms function as a representational layer facilitating queer and trans self-discovery processes in information environments. Given this important role, subject vocabularies–preestablished and controlled sets of terms–warrant examination that considers the insights of queer theory alongside pragmatic information practice strategies. When subject terms are missing, inaccurate, or inadequate, people are elided, misrepresented, or underrepresented. Moreover, it is a fundamental failure of information institutions' missions to connect users and information.

Since 2016, we have been part of a collaboration by queer and trans scholars, librarians, and archivists to recuperate, revise, and implement a subject-term vocabulary, or thesaurus, called 'the Homosaurus.' The Homosaurus is a controlled vocabulary of LGBTQ+-specific terminology that enhances the discoverability of and improves access to LGBTQ+ resources held by archives, libraries, and museums.[1] A linked data vocabulary hosted online and available for application in any information retrieval environment, it is frequently used within library catalogs, digital archives, and online exhibitions (Hardesty & Nolan, 2021). Yet, because the Homosaurus is used by information professionals who input metadata on the back end of search platforms, most people searching for queer and trans content are unaware of when, where, and how they are interacting with Homosaurus terms. However, given the Homosaurus' growing influence, it is increasingly likely that they are. Our aims in this article are threefold: to make visible the work of building and maintaining an LGBTQ+ subject-term vocabulary; explore the theoretical and practical complexities of queer and trans knowledge making that we conduct in working on this project; and argue for the Homosaurus as a form of queer information activism that has widespread impacts on queer and trans epistemologies and information accessibility. By weaving together discussions of our work on the Homosaurus with the theoretical paradigms it is based upon, we assert the critical need for queer and trans activist interventions in the information landscapes that shape our worlds.

McKinney proposes 'information activism,' as a key aspect of late twentieth century lesbian-feminist activism. They argue that organizations and individuals were motivated by the unfulfilled desires for information about women like them – about lesbian life, activism, and history – that was non-existent, erased, or otherwise difficult to find. In response, activists took generating such information into their own hands. McKinney (2020) writes, 'information activism describes a range of materials and processes constituting the collective, often unspectacular labor that sustains social justice movements' (p. 2). We, the Homosaurus editors, are similarly motivated by a refusal to accept that LGBTQ+ lives or resources should be marginalized, hidden, misrepresented, or otherwise difficult for queer and trans people to uncover. Our information activism, like our predecessors, is the manifestation of a longing for a collective history and the 'erotics of being in proximity to a past organized by sexuality – a history built and occupied by

others' (McKinney, 2020, p. 21). Information activism requires reimagining and remaking prevailing standards for information management, including subject-classification (McKinney, 2020, pp. 3–4). Such less-than-glamorous labor unites us to reform the media we use to sustain political movements and lives, including the media used to organize, collect, maintain, and provide access to queer and trans information in an environment of continual precarity.

We begin this article with a discussion of classification – how it functions and why it matters – and how the Homosaurus responds to the impoverished landscape for queer and trans information retrieval. Subsequent sections use specific term clusters from the vocabulary as examples of the two distinct information activism strategies that the Homosaurus adopts, strategies that can be understood as what Emily Drabinski (2013) identifies as 'corrective' and 'analytic' approaches. The 'corrective' approach, discussed in our section on family terms, describes the building out of new terms that cannot be found in other vocabularies. We recognize the importance of having language available to fully describe queer and trans resources, yet we are aware, building on Melissa Adler (2013a, 2018) and D. Grant Campbell (2013), of the limitations of corrective approaches which are an assimilationist strategy that can further empower classification systems. In response, our subsequent section demonstrates an 'analytic' approach to consider the theoretical complexities and implications of the Homosaurus' transgender-themed terms. From a broader perspective, both the corrective and analytic approaches remain unsatisfactory and are, to an extent, designed to fail.

Filling the gaps in dominant classification schemes is where the Homosaurus has and continues to excel. Yet, a truly corrective approach that would offer a more inclusive, equitable and just representation of what is LGBTQ+ demands a full representation of LGBTQ+ communities in all of their richness and diversity. One of the fundamental limits of our ability to do this critical work is the constraints of our board. While the editorial board represents many LGBTQ+ identities (notably, more than half of current members are trans), we are acutely aware of our limitations as majority-white and majority US-based. In part, our project's whiteness reflects the extreme whiteness of cultural heritage fields, where in the US over 85% of professionals identify as white (Galvan, 2015; Westermann et al., 2019). Given the power and impacts of information systems that we have been discussing, including the Homosaurus itself, these statistics are deeply concerning due to their far-reaching effects on information access for people of color. We acknowledge also the limitations inherent in the vocabulary's primacy of 'homo' in its name and history, which despite revisions may contribute to the exclusion and marginalization of queer and trans people who are not reflected therein. Yet, we continue to invest in the Homosaurus as queer information activism because of the worldmaking possibilities that it offers; even as our new information paradigms inherit failures of existing ones, the Homosaurus provides opportunities to make those vulnerable moments of queer and trans information seeking more successful and, perhaps, less palm-sweat-inducing.

Classification and its operations

Our work on the Homosaurus contributes to ongoing attention to classification's significance within information studies scholarship. In *Sorting Things Out*, Geoffrey Bowker

and Susan Leigh Star (2000) define classification as the 'spatial, temporal, or spatio-temporal segmentation of the world' (p. 10). Classification represents and constructs knowledge. The Homosaurus is a particular classification system, a controlled vocabulary, an organized arrangement of words and phrases applied to resources to index and retrieve content. Controlled vocabularies organize knowledge for subsequent retrieval. To achieve subject access, representations of resources with similar subjects are gathered in a system that facilitates naming consistency for collocation (Olson, 2001, p. 640). Naming, Hope Olson (2011) highlights, is about 'the power of controlling subject representation, and, therefore access' (p. 4). Subject classification tools and applications of them are never neutral (Rawson, 2018). Rather, such tools, even while scholars beyond information studies routinely ignore them, are active, powerful agents in knowledge ecosystems. The decisions made in conferring a name or assigning a label shape access to and use of information. Subject classification informs understandings of what is contained within a resource, and the knowledge that can be derived from it. In short, classification is a mechanism through which LGBTQ+ worlds, lives, and identities are constructed and contained.

Controlled vocabularies, Olson (2011) asserts, have three distinguishing characteristics: (1) 'a limited vocabulary from which an indexer or cataloguer exclusively chooses terms for describing the subject content of a document'; (2) 'only one term … for each concept'; and (3) 'a structure that defines the relationships between concepts' (p. 6). Controlled vocabularies often include, as the Homosaurus does, preferred and variant terms. For example, in the Homosaurus, 'Anal sex' is the preferred label for 'Butt fucking.' This example suggests the power of controlled vocabularies – for whom is 'anal sex' the preferred term? Who is controlling the vocabulary and what are the effects of that control?

Most LGBTQ+-focused critical attention to classification targets the US Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) (Adler, 2009, 2013b, 2015, 2017; Angell & Roberto, 2014; Colbert, 2017; Roberto, 2011; Howard & Knowlton, 2018; Watson, 2020). Founded in 1898, LCSH is the preeminent controlled vocabulary for subject access globally (Angell & Roberto, 2014). Cataloging routinely relies on LCSH and its counterpart, the Library of Congress Name Authority File (LCNAF), which provides the authoritative name to be used for a person, organization, event, place, or title. The purpose of controlled vocabularies is the identification of entities and the provision of uniform access to resources. The power embedded in and the responsibility of such a dominant system shapes whether people and subjects are represented at all and the accuracy of those representations in reflecting the people whose identities and lives are at stake.

As LGBTQ+ communities are aware, however, 'one person's infrastructure may be another's barrier' (Bowker & Star, 2000, p. 34). As infrastructures that present significant barriers, LCSH and LCNAF are critiqued for their inaccuracies, omissions, and pathologization of LGBTQ+ persons, organizations, events, places, and titles. Subject access for transgender materials is particularly problematic; as Katelyn Angell and K.R. Roberto (2014) document, the subject heading 'Transsexuals' was created in 1985 and in 1989 was supplemented by 'Transvestites.' An additional heading for 'Female-to-male transsexuals' was added in 2002; however, its counterpart 'Male-to-female transsexuals' was not established until 2006 (Johnson, 2010, p. 668). It was only after 'continued contestation of its meaning,' that the heading 'Transgender people' was added in 2007 (Johnson,

2010, p. 666, 667). However, such additions showcase the ongoing limitations of documenting trans knowledge and experiences, such as the conspicuous lack of terminology to describe genderqueer (Adler, 2009, p. 310), agender, multigender (Angell & Roberto, 2014), or non-binary identities, though this is slowly improving. Within this impoverished descriptive environment, the Homosaurus supplements general knowledge and specialized subject vocabularies, and more specifically, it exists as a complement, alternative, opponent, and critique to/of LCSH.

The homosaurus: information activism in practice

The Homosaurus is not information activists' first effort at creating and enacting more inclusive, dynamic descriptions of LGBTQ+ materials in ways that subvert, open, and make possible LGBTQ+ knowledges and lives. Information activists, including those quoted above, have worked for decades for queer and trans empowerment through classification. They have critiqued and revised dominant controlled vocabularies, and alternatively, established community-based and community-centric controlled vocabularies that classify and document queer and trans lives and experiences in ways that better reflect evolving identities and community-based knowledges.

Alarmed by problematic, biased, and violent subject headings, information professionals have challenged, and/or made new subject terms that defy what Olson (2001) termed the 'cultural supremacy of the mainstream patriarchal, Euro-settler culture' (p. 69). Efforts to remake mainstream heteronormative controlled vocabularies are traceable to the American Library Association's Task Force on Gay Liberation formed in 1971. Organizers took on the Library of Congress's (LC) use of terminology including 'Sexual perversions,' or 'Social pathologies' to describe lesbian and gay content. LC catalogers, who set the agenda for catalogers worldwide, then 'relied on,' Adler (2015) emphasizes, 'definitions in psychiatric literature to determine the literary warrant of subjects related to sexual variance while ignoring and neglecting audiences and voices from other disciplines' (p. 491). LGBTQ+ materials were pathologically equated with materials on pedophilia and sex crimes. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, with Sanford Berman's leadership, proposals were made to LC to address the prejudices and pejoratives in LCSH terms' structure and verbiage for LGBTQ+ topics. Berman brought attention to language's power to 'underpin often malicious stereotypes, to de-humanize the subjects, transforming them into unsavory or at least worthless *objects*' (Berman, 1988, p. 5 cited in Adler, 2012, p. 28).

Critiques of subject indexing grounded in queer theory and trans studies contest the catalog record's purportedly neutral and objective status. Insights from queer theory have demonstrated that it is impossible to 'contain entire fields of knowledge or ways of being in accordance with universalizing systems and structures,' Drabinski (2013) writes. Drabinski (2013) suggests that, while needed, making corrections to problematic subject headings will always be contingent and should be iterative. Such insights invite critical readings of catalogs and subject headings to propose terms that better reflect community-based and vernacular uses. User-generated tagging, as well as customized folksonomies have been proposed as solutions to supplement dominant vocabularies. For example, Adler (2009) compared user-generated tags for books in LibraryThing to LCSH terms for works on transgender

genres and topics. While noting that the 'tags do tend to lack uniformity because there is no governing body regulating [their] establishment,' their collective strength was amplified because 'they allow everyone who is interested in the subject to add to the vocabulary, reflecting all users' positions without bias and without definitive rules' (Adler, 2009, p. 316). Not only can diverse communities find new modes of access to materials through user-recommended cross-references, but minoritized people can develop relationships and mutual support through discussion and sharing. Similarly, Campbell et al. (2017) examined local descriptive language used by LGBTQ + people in Cariri, Brazil and found that the power derived from this community by naming themselves is an act of survival, a means to share vital cultural information through private, coded mechanisms that shapes their community's spaces, discourses, and identities (Campbell et al., 2017, p. 67).

Writing on the development of the Queer Thesaurus – the Homosaurus' precursor – archivist and Homosaurus board member Wel (1998) explained 'the absence of a thesaurus of gay and lesbian index terms can be seen as the principal reason for the lack of indexing of gay and lesbian material and information about gay and lesbian existence.' From its beginnings, then, the Homosaurus responded to an absence of descriptive terminology in order to better index 'gay and lesbian' materials.

The Homosaurus began circa 1982 when the staff of Homodok (University of Amsterdam Documentation Center for Gay and Lesbian Studies, now IHLIA LGBT Heritage) created a list of Dutch-language keywords used to describe resources as they were added to their new bibliographic database (van der Wel, 1998). The Homodok list was significantly expanded in 1987 and in 1993 it merged with a similar subject list from Anna Blaman Huis (a 'multicultural lesbian and gay information center') (van der Wel, 1998). This combined resource, the 'Queer Thesaurus,' was translated into English in 1997 (Greenblatt, 2014, p. 159). By 2013, van der Wel, with Ellen Greenblatt, transformed the Queer Thesaurus into the Homosaurus by adding hundreds of new terms and putting more terms in relation. This revision focused on inclusivity and pushing beyond the bias toward white gay cisgender men. After encountering the 2013 revision, K.J. Rawson saw its unique potential for describing materials in the then-nascent Digital Transgender Archive, an online repository for trans-related historical materials. In 2015, Rawson collaborated with van der Wel to develop an editorial board and transform the Homosaurus into a linked data vocabulary. The Homosaurus editorial board, 6–10 queer and trans identified information professionals and academics, began meeting monthly in 2016 and has worked continuously since.

For its first two decades, the Homosaurus functioned as a standalone, in-house vocabulary, meaning that LGBTQ+ archives could fully describe their resources with this single thesaurus. As a result, early versions had lesbian- and gay-specific terms (e.g., lesbian literature) as well as broader terms (e.g., fiction) that were also needed to describe resources. A year into the revision, the board realized that we were continually facing problems of scope as we patched together sections of the vocabulary that went beyond our expertise and that we could not cover with sufficient depth. We were forced to reconcile the limitations of our capacity and expertise as a small, all-volunteer collective doing queer information activism. Rather than attempting to comprehensively describe any and all resources that were collected in LGBTQ + archives, we determined that the Homosaurus should be abridged to

become a LGBTQ+-specific vocabulary that could be used in conjunction with broader thesauri in any informational context. This new approach meant that we could be more accurate and thorough in representing LGBTQ+ terminology and that the Homosaurus could be used by any cultural heritage institution seeking to describe LGBTQ+ resources. This was particularly helpful in supporting the vocabulary's use in LCSH-dominated library catalogs.

With this new framing in mind, the board began the joyful and cathartic process of cutting nearly all terminology that was not specifically or sufficiently queer or trans. We vigorously debated terms we were uncertain about including. For example, were non-monagomous relationship configurations (e.g., mononormativity, polyamory) inherently or sufficiently queer? Was it helpful to create terms for professions where LGBTQ+ people are often found (e.g., actors, artists)? Should we include drug-related terminology (e.g., crystal meth, poppers)? There were countless questions where we debated parameters for inclusion and exclusion.

Ultimately, we evaluated terms and made decisions about inclusion based on three criteria:

1) Is the term relevant for LGBTQ+ materials?
2) Is the term already available in other vocabularies? If so, does it have an accurate scope and sufficient relationships?
3) Are there likely use cases for the term? If not, is it important to include the term in anticipation of future use?

These criteria developed organically as we deliberated about terms and groupings. Given the depth of our conversations, the revision process took years but resulted in the second version of the Homosaurus, released in May 2019 (we are now on version 3.1). The board continues to meet monthly to review proposed new terms (from board members and vocabulary users) and discuss the project's ongoing development.

The power of naming in the homosaurus

From its inception through its current iteration, the Homosaurus has relied on queer and feminist knowledge generation practices – it developed out of community need, we use a collective decision-making process, attempt transparency and openness, and interrogate the power inherent in the systems and structures that we work within and against. Yet, we are creating this vocabulary within the preexisting hierarchical framework of controlled vocabulary semantics and a small group of people are in the position to make impactful decisions about which terms get included and how they relate to other terms – often *un*queer and *non*feminist practices.

Homosaurus's standard hierarchical structure presents an uneasy format for a queer and trans vocabulary. In a controlled vocabulary context, a hierarchy refers to relationships among terms where some terms are broader, others are narrower, and/or related horizontally. As Figure 1 shows, any term has relationships to other terms – narrower terms grouped under it, broader terms above it, or related terms across from it – represented as either part-to-whole or same-level relationships. Any term can also include a 'scope note,' which provides definition and guidance on its application. A 'use for'
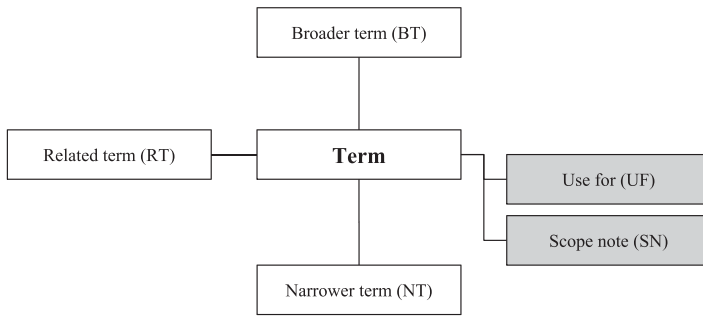
Figure 1. Diagram of the possible relationships among terms in the Homosaurus.

connection might also be made for synonyms or equivalent terms to indicate that users should opt for the approved term. This architecture places terms in meaningful relation, facilitates movement among concepts, and enables resource collocation.

Operating always within a hierarchy, the information activism we employ falls broadly into what Drabinski (2013) labels 'corrective' and 'analytic' approaches, which are our foci in the following subsections. First, as an example of the corrective approach, we discuss the development of family terms that provide branches of new, interconnected subject terms that are excluded from other vocabularies. Having new terms available does not simply allow for more accurate descriptions of the ever-changing configurations and possibilities of queer and trans families, it also provides epistemological visibility and validation for the ways that LGBTQ+ people are already creating our worlds. In the second subsection, we turn to attempts to employ an analytic approach to our information activism by considering the transgender-themed terms, which pose a challenge to the vocabulary's hierarchical structure and reveal the limitations of a corrective approach.

Queer correctives

As has become our board's standard practice, we take on, individually or in pairs, a part of the vocabulary to extend or revise. In late-2018, Marika Cifor volunteered to overhaul the Homosaurus' 'family terms.' This sub-project illustrates where the Homosaurus excels – generating new and interconnected subject terms that cannot readily be found in dominant vocabularies. Examining the correctives offered in family terms illustrates the efficacy and practical necessity of this approach to queer and trans classification.

The LCSH heading 'Families,' according to its scope note labels, 'works on the sociological concept and structure of families as well as works on the everyday life, interactions, and relationships of family members.' Within approved narrower terms is some LGBTQ+ content: 'Gay-parent families,' 'Lesbian-parent families,' and 'Sexual minorities' families' (notably, no 'Transgender families'). Similarly, under 'Parents,' are 'Bisexual parents,' 'Same-sex parents,' 'Transgender parents,' and 'Transsexual parents.' Each of those terms also includes narrower constructions, such as 'Children of … ' fill-in-the-blank LGBTQ+ identity. In this mainstream vocabulary we find some reflection of

LGBTQ+ families, and at least, of nuclear family-making in which some LGBTQ+ people participate. Yet, digging deeper into how even such queer and trans nuclear families are made quickly reveals the standardized vocabulary's limitations.

When it comes to adoption – one way that LGBTQ+ families are created and, in some places, a politically contested right and process – we get from LCSH only the minor and inadequate 'Gay adoption' subheading. 'Gay' is used to encompass, as the scope note denotes, 'works on adoption of children by gay men or lesbians.' We get nothing about the particularities of adopting as a bisexual, transgender, or queer-identified person or family unit. There is no narrower heading to address the ubiquitous need for non-gestational parents in non-heterosexual relationships to do second-parent adoptions, a pricey, discriminatory legal process by which the non-gestational parent adopts their own child to protect their parental rights. In contrast, in the Homosaurus, we offer a heading for 'LGBTQ+ adoption.' Under that term, is the narrower term, 'Second parent adoption,' alongside subjects like 'LGBTQ+ adoptive children.'

The urgency of interrogating with specificity the terms that shape the legal rights and the dignity and life-experiences of LGBTQ+ people and families, become particularly salient as our families are still threatened and our lives open topics for political debate. As we wrote in 2021, the Supreme Court of the United States declined to take-up *Box v. Henderson*, a case that would have stripped of their equal parenting rights married lesbian couples who conceived children with sperm donors' aid. When a married opposite-sex couple used a donor, Indiana recognized the non-gestational parent as the child's parent. However, when a married same-sex couple did the same thing, the state refused to recognize the birth mother's wife. While the Court ultimately declined to hear it, the case indicates an ongoing attack on the rights and protections granted by *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the case that extended marital privileges to same-sex spouses. Thinking about LGBTQ+ adoptions showcases how the Homosaurus's nuanced terminology can make vital information for LGBTQ+ people in precarious legal situations retrievable and usable. The Homosaurus works beautifully when the aim is to add content, specificity, or nuance in the same hierarchical form to represent LGBTQ+-related knowledge and experience.

Similarly, the revamped LGBTQ+ terms offer a potent corrective for thinking about other kinds of queer and trans families we have and create. Marlon M. Bailey's powerful first-person performance ethnography, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*, examines ballroom scenes in Detroit and discusses Black and Brown queer and trans community and family formation at length. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century US, Black and Latinx queer and trans people organized themselves into houses and created balls. Ballroom events now happen worldwide and they continue to disrupt dominant constructions of gender, sexuality, community, and, importantly, kinship. As Bailey documents, Ballroom houses constitute multigenerational chosen families. These families are complete with a queering of family roles including 'mothers,' 'fathers,' 'children,' and grandparents. 'The kinship system,' Bailey (2019) said, 'is the unit of safety, of affirmation, of nurturing. You have house parents … you're a house mother or father, you are often elected or appointed … you nurture your children … there's a real sophisticated kinship system that is not just about mothers and fathers, but it's also about aunts and uncles, and siblings.' The importance of queerer families for LGBTQ+ people, who have often been misunderstood by or rejected from their families of origin, should not be underestimated

when it comes to building the resilience, care, and connection requisite to survival and thriving, particularly for LGBTQ+ communities of color.

The Machine Readable Catalog Record (MARC) for *Butch Queens,* one copied by libraries worldwide, includes five LCSH terms: 'Gay and lesbian dance parties–Michigan–Detroit,' 'Female impersonators–Michigan–Detroit,' 'Gay culture–Michigan–Detroit,' 'African American gays–Michigan–Detroit,' and 'Sexual minorities–Michigan–Detroit.' Setting aside the problematic 'Female impersonators' as a preferred term, we are left with subjects that address the book's regional, racial and gay male contexts. Missing is any notion of family and kinship, which are fundamental to this project and to Black and Latinx queer and trans life. Perhaps it should come as no surprise, however, that LCSH offers little about the constitution of families by and for LGBTQ+ people. Even as the scope note for 'Family' does not use the word, 'biological,' there is no subheading for family that is not based on blood lines. In LCSH there is no heading for 'Chosen Family,' much less families that are queer and trans in origin such as 'Ballroom Families' or 'Leather Families,' to name but a few.

It is in the corrective of supplying more extensive, precise, and accurate community-driven language for labeling queer and trans resources that the Homosaurus excels. Yet, we are keenly aware of this strategy's limits (Adler & Harper, 2018; Campbell, 2013). Moreover, to engage in an adequately corrective approach requires representation – for this project to succeed in creating a representation of what is LGBTQ+ would require the full representation of our communities. With knowledge of the myriad limitations that stem from the legacy of a white cisgender gay focus and the whiteness, middle-classness, and Euro-American centricity of our board and the field, we remain committed to doing information activism to improve the discoverability of LGBTQ+ resources. Catalogers are doing crucial work, like supplementing the paucity of the LCSH subject headings applied to Bailey's work with ones from the Homosaurus ('LGBTQ+ chosen families,' 'Ball culture,' and 'Ballroom families' would be key additions, for instance). These headings offer measured hope of acknowledging and celebrating the knowledges and experiences of queer and trans people and communities. The Homosaurus, while not yet achieving its full potential, has an important advantage when it comes to nimbleness because the vocabulary can readily move and expand to accommodate the forms our families take now and in the future. We can continue to correct, but such efforts still uphold and extend dominant classification systems that are always embedded in power structures. Queer and trans people need more than a corrective approach can offer.

A trans analytic approach to hierarchies

While the 'family terms' subset provides an illustration of where the Homosaurus offers productive corrective opportunities to expand the available lexicon for describing LGBTQ+ resources, an analytic approach reveals that no amount of expansion could ever fully mitigate the logistical and philosophical challenges inherent in an LGBTQ+ controlled vocabulary. Informed by queer theory, Drabinski's analytic approach offers a sweeping critique that can be applied to the normativizing impulse of the thesaurus structure (see Figure 1): it flattens the complexity of LGBTQ+ terminologies; puts terms in static and hierarchical relationship to one another; exerts normativizing
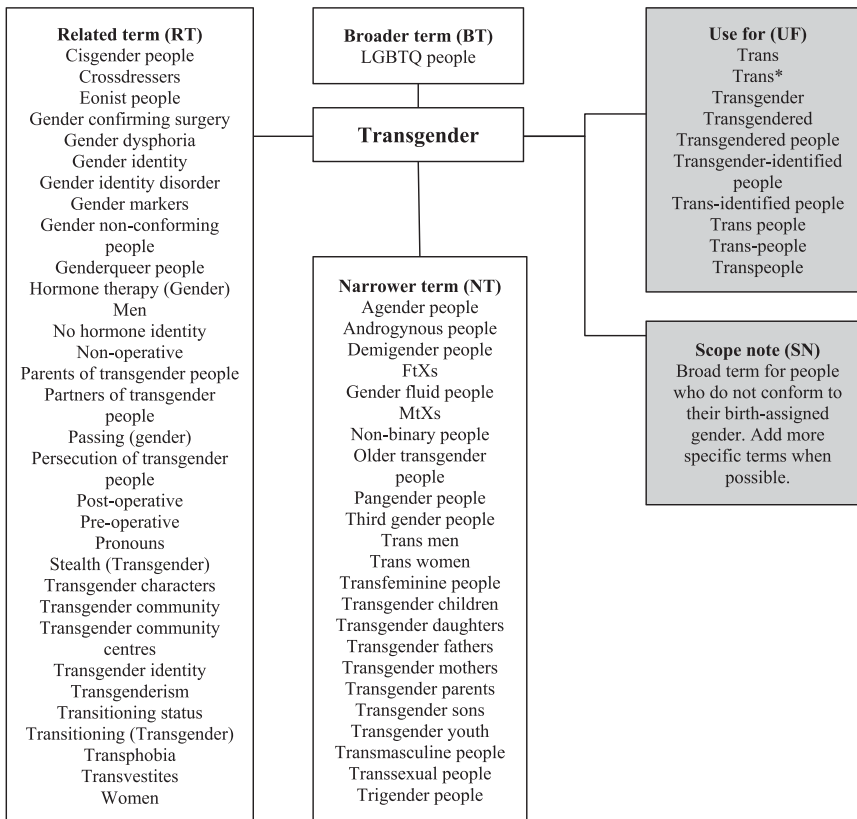
Figure 2. Diagram of connections to the term 'transgender.'

power to privilege certain terms and exclude others; and narrowly delineates how the terms should be used. Indeed, sometimes it is hard to imagine how we might recuperate any subversive force from this structure, even when our focus is LGBTQ+ content. Information activists have long grappled with these challenges and the thrust of their work is to rupture the veneer of objectivity that encases knowledge organization systems, reveal their unavoidable bias, and invite critical reflection by users. Following that logic, the Homosaurus itself warrants queer critique.

The subject term 'Transgender people' is a helpful for unpacking the implications of the Homosaurus' hierarchical structure (and by extension that of many other controlled vocabularies). Figure 2 diagrams the entry for 'transgender people,' which includes all potential types of relationships in the hierarchical structure. The 'narrower terms' show precisely which terms we included, some of which are uncontroversial (e.g., family relationship terms), whereas others are quite contentious (e.g., 'Non-binary people,' 'Transsexual people'). Related terms are generally lower stakes because they do not represent a part-to-whole relationship, though we have included historically outdated terms that are only intended by the editorial board to be applied in particular contexts (e.g., 'Eonist people,' 'Transvestites') as well as connections to non-trans terms to call attention to their status as the invisible cisgender norm (e.g., 'Men,' 'Women').[2] In recognition of the complexity of the term 'Transgender people,' the scope note instructs users to 'add

more specific terms when possible,' suggesting that it can be helpfully supplemented by more precise terms. Importantly, this heading does not contain all of the trans-related terms and many others, such as 'FTMs' and 'MTFs', are included as narrower terms of 'Transsexual People.'

The most vexing of this entire term group is the 'Use for' list. This section lists the subject terms that are excluded from the Homosaurus in favor of 'Transgender people' as preferred term. As an editorial board, we may be fully committed to the endless proliferation of language in theory, but that would be a problematic approach since nearly identical concepts would become separate and discrete entities within information environments. For example, 'Trans people' and 'Transgender people,' which have been used in slightly divergent ways: if we were to include both concepts, information professionals applying the terms would struggle to differentiate between them and the resources they were applied to would become disconnected from one another and, ultimately, they would be less discoverable or hidden altogether.

As a point of comparison, LCSH has the same term, 'Transgender people,' with the broader term of 'persons' (as opposed to our LGBTQ+-specific framework grouping). It also includes interesting, if idiosyncratic, narrower terms: 'Christian transgender people,' 'Church work with transgender people,' 'Jewish transgender people,' 'Libraries and transgender people,' 'Older transgender people,' 'Social work with transgender people,' 'Transgender men,' 'Transgender women,' and 'Transsexuals.'[3] It's noteworthy that three of nine terms concern religion yet there are no narrower relationships to any genderqueer or non-binary terms (LCSH has 'Gender-nonconforming people' but it is not connected to 'Transgender people'). LCSH terms are added when literary warrant requires; it is only when items catalogued for the LC need a subject heading that is not already available that a new heading is added. As Adler (2017) has demonstrated, this process is rife with problematic and oppressive language practices. LCSH has far fewer trans-specific terms than the Homosaurus and there are fewer term relationships to parse out – 'Gender-nonconforming people,' for example, only has a single connection to the broader term 'persons.'

As a vocabulary that is considerably smaller than LCSH (1,800 + versus 348,000 + terms), the Homosaurus can be approached holistically and the relationships that we build among terms can be more closely aligned with community-based language practices. This discussion of a single term illustrates the kinds of decisions the board has struggled with for several years as we have recreated this vocabulary.

Some of the terms that we invest more time in debating are the grouping terms, which are broader terms that have many narrower terms that they coalesce. These terms are particularly important to the vocabulary because they facilitate a number of relationships (sometimes several dozen) stemming from a single node, which also helps to make the vocabulary more readable. Yet at times, grouping terms become pressure points that establish hierarchies and enact epistemologies that we do not endorse. For example, the term 'Culturally-specific gender identities' had approximately 50 terms grouped under its capacious banner. This term itself was never intended to be used in practice to describe resources because *all* gender identities are culturally specific. Though our aim was to connect terms describing non-Western gender identities, predominately in non-English languages, we became increasingly uncomfortable with what this gesture revealed – the problematic and poorly veiled logics of whiteness, colonialism, and

ethnocentrism that undergird the project. In January 2021, the board updated the term to 'Non-Euro-American Gender and Sexual Identities.' We felt thatthis was a slight improvement since it at least named the bias behind the grouping, though the bias itself remains.

As Amber Billey and Drabinski (2019) argue, 'all knowledge organization schemes reflect the ideologies from which they emerge.' In awareness of this inevitability, we continually ask ourselves: whose queer and trans lexicon are we capturing? One initial answer is that by having an English-only vocabulary, we are only capturing queer and trans lexicons used by English speakers. In discussing the decolonial possibilities of Cherokee-language-based digital archives, Ellen Cushman (2013) argues, 'English remains the lingua franca of imperialism, knowledge work, and global capitalism' (p. 121). Cushman offers epistemic delinking, a process of replacing the tenets of colonialism by centering decolonial perspectives, as means to begin addressing this structural barrier. In the context of the Homosaurus, this is a helpful framework to aspire towards as we begin exploring translation. Several Homosaurus users are in the process of translating the vocabulary into other languages and we have started to imagine a multi-language platform that does not use English as the standard from which all other languages are mapped. We are imagining ways of building a diffused and collaborative translation model that resists the centralization of an English LGBTQ+ lexicon that other languages are forced to fit into.

Even if we are successful in building a multilingual platform that disrupts the English-language basis of our project, we will need to continue to confront the coercive effects that English-based LGBTQ+ discourses have within the US and globally. Cathy J. Cohen's (1997) landmark 'Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens' offers a still-compelling critique of 'a single-oppression framework' that can 'misrepresent the distribution of power within and outside of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities' (p. 441); given the primacy of 'homo' in the framing and functioning of our thesaurus, how can we account for the project's skewed attention to single-issue queer positionality, which, when unmarked, presuppose a white, cisgender gay or lesbian, and otherwise normative subject? In 'The Radical Potential of Queer? 20 Years Later,' Cohen (2019) expresses concern that as queer has been adopted more frequently as an identity term, it has lost much of its transformative potential as a collective orientation to power. Cohen's observations demonstrate how queer terminology evolves in complex relation to power, and it is often a give-and-take between individual and collective identities. This give-and-take often plays out a familiar scene where those with less power are forced to adopt the language developed and deployed by those with more.

Queer and trans linguistic colonization can be traced beyond the US. On the one hand, there is a long a troubling history of what Sujata Moorti (2016) describes in 'A Queer Romance with the Hijra' as the practice of 'turning to the non-West for spaces of redeeming alterity' (p. 20). In such cases, strategic attention to 'foreign' examples of non-Western sexual and gender alterity are used to reinforce, buttress, and consolidate Western sexual and gender identity norms and categories. On the other hand, contributors to *Sexuality and Translation in World Politics* argue, when there are efforts to export U.S.-based LGBT concepts, 'indigenous sexualities defy contemporary LGBT and queer frameworks,' result in 'impossibilities of epistemological translation' (Picq & Tikuna, 2019, pp. 60–61). Such impossibilities present a significant concern for the Homosaurus as we aspire to collaborate globally while mitigating the colonial force of

our efforts. While the hierarchies, static terms, and English-language basis of our project present formidable challenges for representing queer and trans epistemologies, the work of the Homosaurus is not simply to respond to lacking classification systems such as LCSH (a corrective approach), but it is to continually build knowledge upon and beyond the Homosaurus itself as we confront the confines of what a controlled vocabulary is and what effects it can have.

Conclusion

In moments of candor, our board readily and cheerfully admits that our project is destined to fail. After all, how could we possibly maintain an always-up-to-date and comprehensive LGBTQ+ vocabulary given how quickly language evolves, how passionately terms are contested, how forcefully queer and trans terms resist hierarchical structures, and the ways that we will inevitably misrepresent, underrepresent, and overrepresent factions of LGBTQ+ life? In confronting such shortcomings, we are aligned with queer theoretical reckonings with failure, such as Jack Halberstam's (2011) reminder that '… there is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing, and that all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner' (p. 120). Indeed, our failing points to the utter impossibility of all subject term vocabularies, from massive thesauri like LCSH to grassroots projects like the Homosaurus, to facilitate equitable resource discovery.

Returning to the trope of queer and trans people turning to libraries and archives to find themselves, we are left to interrogate: which queer and trans people, exactly, have been finding themselves in cultural heritage spaces? The fast pace of language evolution in LGBTQ+ communities, especially developed by younger generations, is a survival tactic deployed to transmit and sustain ourselves. It does not seem much of a stretch, then, to imagine that the most marginalized LGBTQ+ people are simultaneously those who are most likely to be eager for self-discovery and yet they are the people who are least likely to find themselves. As Campbell et al. (2017) note, 'keeping up with the constantly shifting terminology within marginalized communities is difficult, expensive, time-consuming, and ultimately futile. Even as indexers discover fresh concepts and terms and lead-in terms, the community abandons them for even newer terms, unknown to established institutions and law-enforcement bodies' (p. 589). Much of the subcultural power of queer and trans language practices depends on the relative obscurity of the language; as soon as it becomes institutionalized, it loses its power.

In this sense, projects like the Homosaurus may seem to be working across purposes with community language practices because if we understand the inclusion of LGBTQ+ terminology into the Homosaurus as a form of institutionalization – or, at least, domestication – are we inadvertently widening the gap between LGBTQ+ community lexicons and information systems that strive to facilitate the discovery of materials relevant to our communities? Perhaps.

Yet despite these risks, we persist in developing the Homosaurus as a form of 'information activism,' queer and trans worldmaking that intervenes in what Michelle Caswell et al. (2016) refer to as the 'symbolic annihilation' that occurs when marginalized groups are systematically misrepresented or excluded from information systems. We have enacted a corrective approach by adding hundreds of LGBTQ+ terms that cannot be

found in any other subject term vocabularies, often including terminology before we are aware of the need for it to prepare for materials that may not yet exist (e.g., 'Bisexual Buddhists,' 'Transgender beaches'). We have used the reverse of this approach as well, such as deleting all references to pedophilia given the problematic connection between gayness and pedophilia that persists in popular culture. As Drabinski (2013) argues in a Foucauldian fashion: 'knowledge organization structures are productive, not merely representative. They do not smoothly represent reality, but discursively produce it, constituting the field of potential identities users can either claim as true and authentic representations of themselves or resist as not quite correct' (p. 102). In this spirit, we treat the Homosaurus as a tool for discursive production and revision of queer and trans epistemologies.

While adding and removing terminology from the vocabulary is central to our work, we are aware that a corrective approach can never be effective without an ongoing analytic approach that critically examines the classificatory process itself, which relies upon controlled vocabularies to function. As information activists, we aspire to what Olson (2001) proposed as critical classification's aim, to make the very 'limits of our existing information systems permeable' (p. 659). Instead of holding onto the power of voice, construction, and definition, Olson (2001) explains, 'we who are on the inside of the information structures must create holes in our structures where power can leak out' (p. 659). As a collective, we have endeavored to at once make permeable the systems that dominate our information ecosystems through the creation of the Homosaurus, while also recognizing that we also hold some power as those who are inside the Homosaurus as an information structure. Our hope is that this article provides one of many opportunities for that power to leak – and perhaps eventually pour – out.

Notes

1. We are intentional in the subtle shifts that we make between 'queer' and 'LGBTQ+' throughout this article. We use LGBTQ+ when we are referring to individuals or groups who identify or are referred to as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other closely related terms and we use use the phrase 'queer and trans' in a similarly broad and inclusive way. We use 'queer' by itself when invoking an anti-normative theoretical paradigm or resistance to heteropatriarchy. As we know well, this terminology will continue to evolve and we trust readers will recognize that we are working with our now-current language and our intention is to be as nuanced and inclusive as possible.
2. While the board uses scope notes to instruct users on how a term should be implemented, we have already seen cases of terms being used incorrectly or anachronistically. This highlights a frustrating but perhaps unavoidable gap between our intentions and the implementation of the resource.
3. For more detail, see https://id.loc.gov/authorities/subjects/sh2007003708.html.

Acknowledgement

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Marika Cifor is Assistant Professor in the Information School and adjunct faculty in Gender, Women, & Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington. She is a feminist scholar of archival studies and digital studies. Her research investigates how individuals and communities marginalized by gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, and HIV-status are represented and how they document and represent themselves in archives and digital cultures. Cifor is the author or *Viral Cultures: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS* (University of Minnesota Press, 2022). She has been a member of the Homosaurus editorial board since 2016.

K.J. Rawson is Associate Professor of English and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Northeastern University. He is also the founder and director of the Digital Transgender Archive, an award-winning online repository of trans-related historical materials, and he is the co-chair of the editorial board of the Homosaurus. His work is at the intersections of the Digital Humanities and Rhetoric, LGBTQ+, and Feminist Studies.

ORCID

Marika Cifor 🔶 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1645-7158
K.J. Rawson 🔶 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5755-3624

References

Adler, M. (2009). Transcending Library catalogs: A comparative Study of controlled terms in Library of Congress Subject Headings and user-generated tags in LibraryThing for Transgender books. *Journal of Web Librarianship*, *3*(4), 309–331. https://doi.org/10.1080/19322900903341099

Adler, M. (2012). *FOR SEXUAL PERVERSION See PARAPHILIAS: Disciplining Sexual Deviance at the Library of Congress* [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison]. https://depot.library.wisc.edu/repository/fedora/1711.dl:2PQLILKWLIYXD8A/datastreams/REF/content

Adler, M. (2013a). Paraphilias: The perversion of meaning in the Library of Congress catalog. In P. Keilty, & R. Dean (Eds.), *Feminist and Queer Information Studies reader* (pp. 309–321). Litwin Books.

Adler, M. (2013b). Gender expression in a small world: Social tagging of transgender-themed books. *Proceedings of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, *50*(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1002/meet.14505001081.

Adler, M. (2015). Let's Not homosexualize the Library stacks": liberating gays in the Library catalog. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, *24*(3), 478–507. https://doi.org/10.7560/JHS24306

Adler, M. (2017). *Cruising the library: Perversities in the organization of knowledge*. Fordham University Press.

Adler, M., & Harper, L. M. (2018).: Race and ethnicity in classification systems: Teaching knowledge organization from a Social justice perspective. *Library Trends*, *67*(1), 52–73. https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2018.0025

Angell, K., & Roberto, K. R. (2014). Cataloging. *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *1*(1-2), 53–56. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399587

Bailey, M. M. (2019, December 12). *The Growth (And New Contexts) Of LGBTQ Ball Culture* [Interview]. WBUR. https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2019/12/11/ballroom-scene-lgbtq-ball-culture-vogue

Berman, Sanford. (1988). *Worth noting: Editorials, letters, essays, an interview, and bibliography*. McFarland and Company Incorporated Pub.

Billey, A., & Drabinski, E. (2019). Questioning authority. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 6 (1), 117–123. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7253538

Bowker, G. C., & Star, S. L. (2000). *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its consequences*. MIT Press.

Campbell, D. G. (2013). Queer theory and the creation of contextual subject access tools for Gay and lesbian communities. In P. Keilty, & R. Dean (Eds.), *Feminist and Queer Information Studies reader* (pp. 122–131). Litwin Books.

Campbell, D. G., Chaves Guimarães, J. A., Pinho, F. A., Martínez-Ávila, D., & Nascimento, F. A. (2017). The terminological polyhedron in LGBTQ terminology: Self-Naming as a power to empower in knowledge organization. *Knowledge Organization*, *44*(8), 586–591. https://doi.org/10.5771/0943-7444-2017-8-586

Caswell, M., Cifor, M., & Ramirez, M. H. (2016). To suddenly discover yourself existing": uncovering the impact of community archives. *The American Archivist*, *79*(1), 56–81. https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.79.1.56

Cohen, C. (2019). The Radical Potential of queer? *GLQ*, *25*(1), 140–144. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-7275334

Cohen, C. J. (1997). Punks, bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer politics? *GLQ*, *3*(4), 437–465. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-3-4-437

Colbert, J. L. (2017). *Comparing Library of Congress Subject Headings to Keyword Searches Involving LGBT Topics: A Pilot Study* [Master's thesis, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign]. https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/97437

Cushman, E. (2013). Wampum, sequoyan, and story: Decolonizing the digital archive. *College English*, *76*(2), 115–135. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24238145.

Drabinski, E. (2013). Queering the catalog: Queer theory and the Politics of correction. *The Library Quarterly*, *83*(2), 94–111. https://doi.org/10.1086/669547

Drushel, B. (2010). Virtually supportive: Self-disclosure of minority sexualities through online social networking sites. In C. Pullen, & M. Cooper (Eds.), *LGBT identity and online New media*. (pp. 76-86). Routledge.

Feinberg, M. (2010). Two kinds of evidence: How information systems form rhetorical arguments. *Journal of Documentation*, *66*(4), 491–512. https://doi.org/10.1108/00220411011052920

Galvan, A. (2015, June 3). Soliciting Performance, Hiding Bias: Whiteness and Librarianship. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/soliciting-performance-hiding-bias-whiteness-and-librarianship/

Greenblatt, E. (2014). *Serving LGBTIQ Library and archives users: Essays on outreach, service, collections and access*. McFarland.

Halberstam, J. (2011). *The queer Art of failure*. Duke University Press.

Hardesty, J. L., & Nolan, A. (2021). Mitigating bias in metadata: A Use case using Homosaurus linked data. *Information Technology and Libraries*, *40*(3), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.6017/ital.v40i3.13053

Hardy, J. (2021). Queer information literacies: Social and technological circulation in the rural midwestern United States. *Information, Communication & Society*, *24*(1), 102–117. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1635184

Howard, S. A., & Knowlton, S. A. (2018). Browsing through bias: The Library of Congress classification and subject headings for African American Studies and LGBTQIA Studies. *Library Trends*, *67*(1), 74–88. https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2018.0026

Johnson, M. (2010). Transgender subject access: History and current practice. *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, *48*(8), 661–683. https://doi.org/10.1080/01639370903534398

Lovelock, M. (2019). My coming out story": lesbian, gay and bisexual youth identities on YouTube. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *22*(1), 70–85. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877917720237

McKinney, C. (2018). Finding the lines to My people. *GLQ*, *24*(1), 55–83. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-4254504

McKinney, C. (2020). *Information activism*. Duke University Press.

Moorti, S. (2016). A Queer Romance with the hijra. *QED*, *3*(2), 18–34. https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.3.2.0018

Olson, H. A. (2001). The power to name: Representation in Library catalogs. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *26*(3), 639–668. https://doi.org/10.1086/495624

Olson, H. A. (2011). *The power to name: Locating the limits of subject representation in libraries*. Springer.

Picq, M. L., & Tikuna, J. (2019). Indigenous sexaulities: Resisting conquest and translation. In M. L. Picq, & C. Cottet (Eds.), *Sexuality and Translation in world politics* (pp. 57–71). E-international Relations Publishing.

Rawson, K. J. (2014). Transgender worldmaking in cyberspace: Historical activism on the internet. *QED*, *12*(2), 38–60. https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.1.2.0038

Rawson, K. J. (2018). The rhetorical power of archival description: Classifying images of gender transgression. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *48*(4), 327–351. https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2017.1347951

Roberto, K. R. (2011). Inflexible bodies: Metadata for Transgender identities. *Journal of Information Ethics*, *20*(2), 56–64. https://doi.org/10.3172/JIE.20.2.56

Watson, B. M. (2020). "There was Sex but no sexuality*:" critical Cataloging and the classification of asexuality in LCSH. *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, *58*(6), 547–565. https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2020.1796876

Wel, J. V. D. (1998, September 29). *The Realization of the Queer Thesauru*s [Paper presentation]. Refiguring the Archive Seminar Series, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.

Westermann, M., Sweeney, L., & Schonfeld, R. (2019). Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018. Ithaka S + R. https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.310935