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# Gender and Sexuality, Self-Identity, and Libraries: Readers' Advisory as a Technique for Creative (Dis)Assembly

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## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the theme of gender, sexuality, and information by considering how libraries might offer readers' advisory services to young readers in socially just ways. Readers' advisory is a service found in public and school libraries in which librarians recommend materials to library visitors, who are often young readers. Although libraries are commonly perceived as neutral, apolitical institutions, the paper shows how readers' advisory in libraries is a site of struggle and contestation for young readers in terms of their gender identity and sexuality. Drawing from the works of Nikolas Rose and Michel Foucault, the authors show how readers' advisory is a technique of self-assembly where young readers negotiate their self-identities amid surrounding library discourses. The authors provide several reasons why readers' advisory approaches, as they are presented in professional library literature, are problematic. As an alternative conceptualization of readers' advisory, the paper then proposes what is dubbed a "disjunctional" approach. The authors explain what this approach is, provide concrete examples of how it might be adopted, and suggest avenues for further study.

## INTRODUCTION

The age of the book has been the exercise of dominion and domination over not only the forces of nature but over other men and women, cultures, and societies. Knowledge, in short, is the form in which power works its way in the world. Therefore, the powers of the book are everywhere bound up with growth of technological, national, state and class power—the powers of domination. — James W. Carey, *The Paradox of the Book*

If things are only to be known through names, how can we suppose that the givers of names had knowledge, or were legislators before there were names at all, and therefore before they could have known them? — Socrates, Plato's *Cratylus*

I would be living as fAe the weirdo for the rest of my life whether I had gone through this transition or not. That is just who I am. So, I'm fAe the weirdo and now I have the construction of self on the outside that I've wanted my entire life . . . and I'm happy with what I've created.  
— fAe, *Gender Redesigner*

It is critical not to our self-understanding but to our social practice itself that we as social beings can escape whatever formalization we manufacture. No doubt ratiocination characterizes a part of human thinking, but thinking encompasses that which exceeds formalization. . . . That is the human thing; that we can work along such conflicting but apparently reasonable lines. — David Golumbia, *The Cultural Logic of Computationalism*

This study applies the ideas of Nikolas Rose and Michel Foucault to the library-related discourse surrounding readers' advisory services. Readers' advisory for young readers, especially when viewed through the lenses of gender and sexuality, is an important yet overlooked means by which young readers' self-identities are conditioned. Based on a review of the literature regarding library services for young readers and gender and sexuality, it seems clear that young readers must overcome six thematic challenges: *essentialization*, *assignment*, *othering*, *cultural imperialism*, *tokenism*, and *complicity*. A potential solution to these challenges comes by way of understanding that young readers' identities are shaped by library advisory services that are imprecise, disorderly, irresolvable, and nonmechanical. The concrete suggestions offered in this paper are

- to understand that gender identity and sexuality are provisional and dynamic constructs;
- to disassociate any perceived gender identities and sexualities of readers and recommend titles based on story quality and reader interests instead;
- to challenge and disrupt the reproduction of hegemonic practices, such as heteronormativity and gender binarism;
- to use an open-ended interview process in attempts to guide readers toward titles;
- to facilitate anonymous searching via robust finding aids; and
- to create an atmosphere that welcomes diverse identities.

Possible research methods that may be employed in the interest of developing these suggested tactics for dis-assembling and thereby liberating readers' advisory services are also considered in this discussion.

## LANGUAGE, THE SELF, AND SELF-ASSEMBLY

Nikolas Rose is a British historian and sociologist whose work has explored the hidden power relations inherent in the discourses and practices of professional disciplines, including those of psychology and the biological sciences. Central to his work is the question of how subjectivity is shaped by discourses in order to support certain economic and political forms. The self, Rose (1997) says, is composed of language; it is a historical, contingent, and mobile assemblage of vocabularies (pp. 234, 238). He states that we draw from the language of our cultures to assemble ourselves, thereby constructing bricolages of memories, identities, passions, sicknesses, and dreams. Rose suggests that by using the “stories of the self that our culture makes available to us” (Gergen [1991], qtd. in Rose, p. 237), we “experience ourselves as certain types of creatures . . . under certain description[s]” (p. 234).

In Rose’s view, the language we use to assemble ourselves, while not naturally occurring in the cosmos, our bodies, nor our minds, nevertheless subjects us to constraints of power. Vocabularies are structured into orders, hierarchies, and categories, thereby regulating behaviors and directing ways of life (Foucault, 2000, pp. 340–341). Following Foucault (1995, pp. 28–29), Rose (1997) suggests that the self is packaged by various “machines”—the techniques and practices of power encountered every day (pp. 238–241, 246). By “machines,” Rose means things like asymmetrical observations by authorities, predetermined census categories, prefixes and naming conventions, official reports, and the discourse practices of scientific professions. These machines—these discourses that establish the vocabularies that become “selves”—tug and snare and attach to bodies, subjecting them to networks of control and discipline (Foucault, 1995). It is “only through being assembled together with an array of non-natural, non-individualized techniques which extend far beyond the boundaries of the human skin is one capable of being a self with an autobiography” (Rose, 1997, p. 240). “Selves” are the nodes of a network, empty in and of themselves, defined only in relation to other bodies and connected by relations of power.

The self-assembly line that comprises selves is diffuse and invisible though everywhere. It is found in laboratories, classrooms, factories, and prisons—the institutions of authority. Languages script the positions bodies inhabit, the procedures they follow, and the identities they construct (pp. 240–241). Power relations connected to institutions of authority “have an immediate hold upon [our bodies]; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Foucault, 1995, p. 25). It is through encounters with language-generating techniques and practices that subjects are assembled. For better or worse, Rose (1997) writes, the psychological self has become a fixture of culture and a mode of power.

Selves are assembled through the systems they regularly encounter. Rose writes that they are formed through doctors' visits, exam results, expert opinions, teachers' feedback, and expert languages. The disciplines of psychology and medicine are influential in the assembly of selves because they determine who is sick, who needs help, and who is normal. Foucault (1990) shows how the development of medical disciplines and language affects the types of selves that are created, especially with regard to sexuality and gender. The authorized vocabularies of scientific disciplines create dominant discourses related to some genders and sexualities, rendering some identities as legible and acceptable and others as deviant and unacceptable. The dominant discourses of today form an inflexible vocabulary of gender and sexuality that violently assembles gendered and sexual selves.

### GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND SELF-ASSEMBLY

Contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality illustrate how the languages applied to different selves often structure these selves into aggregate groups; hierarchies among groups; institutions of domination; dominant, neutral, or invisible groups; and marginal and deviant groups. Gender and sexual norms are sustained by complicity to everyday sayings and practices. These practices are legitimized and sustained by disciplines of authority—the scientific experts.

What are the dominant discourses of today that construct and assemble gendered and sexual selves? What kinds of identities are privileged or pathologized as a result of these discourses? Gender identity is generally seen in American culture as binary: selves are either boys or girls. For the purposes of this study, gender identity is viewed as how one defines oneself as a man, woman, or other gender. These genders are typically regarded as mutually exclusive. Gender identities often correspond to the sexual characteristics of the biological bodies of individuals, and there are generally only considered to be two sexes as well, one for each gender identity: male and female. The boy gender corresponds to selves with penises—males—and girl gender maps onto bodies with no penises—females. Babies born intersex are often surgically altered to conform to one of the two established sexes. As the babies are raised, it is assumed that they will begin to identify with the gender that corresponds with their sex. Intersex selves are considered deviant because they do not conform to the established binaries.

Gender is not only a biological category, but also a social category (Fausto-Sterling, 2012b, p. 6). Gender identity is a performance (Butler, 2007; Goffman, 1959). Fausto-Sterling (2012b) states that each individual “manufactures a gender presentation that can feed back on the individual’s sex, and is interpreted by others using the specific gender frameworks of an individual’s culture” (p. 7). Gender is at least partly an assemblage

of the self that uses the parts and labor drawn from surrounding vocabularies and interactions. Some of the parts and labor of self-assemblage are determined by one's make and model—one's biology—but much of the assembly process is social and cultural, determined by the "rules of the road." Girls are pink, boys are blue; boys play with guns, girls play with dolls. Each gender is expected to perform its own role. Mixtures and hybrids often face societal rejection. Women who exhibit rebellion against gender norms through traditionally masculine traits are called "tomboys." While sometimes accepted for young girls and associated with independence, postadolescent women are expected to conform to gender roles and norms and take on "womanly duties" (Schilt, 2009, p. 837). Men who exhibit traditionally feminine traits experience much more resistance, even in childhood, and may be termed a "sissy" by unreceptive parties. This term, as opposed to tomboy, has negative connotations, and so boys are often discouraged from pursuing these interests, even at a young age.

The unequal treatment of men and women in society persists well past childhood, however, creating barriers and differences that expose a clear schism between the genders. Boys and men are seen as dominant and natural compared to girls and women, who lack penises. Male privilege is observable in our patriarchal, misogynistic society by looking at the history of women's rights compared to men's, the gendered composition of professions, the gendered nature of positions of authority, and physical violence against women. Johnson (2001) provides some examples of what patriarchy and male privilege look like in everyday life: first, men are held to lower standards than women; second, men can assume that their gender will not be used to determine whether they will fit in or whether others will feel comfortable with them; and, lastly, men generally "don't find themselves slotted into a narrow range of occupations identified with their gender like women are slotted into community relations, human resources, social work, elementary school teaching, librarianship, nursing, clerical and secretarial" (pp. 30–31).

It is clear that men experience the pushes and pulls of power differently than women. Women, because they are the "other" of men, because they are supposedly weak and lack everything men have, experience symbolic, as well as physical violence as a result. In the current language of gender identity, women and men are trapped inside themselves due to the structures of language. Masculinity and femininity are defined in specific ways, and men and women must fit into these models. These models, it is assumed, are unchanging and apply to everyone. Symbolism, vocabularies, and conversations are "major arenas" in which selves are assembled and "gender privilege is played out" (p. 101). Sexuality is similar to gender identity in that options are limited, but in the case of sexuality, there is only one "normal" choice: heterosexuality. For the purposes of this study, *sexuality* is defined as the thoughts, desires, and behaviors associated with

sex and sexual attraction. The presumption of heteronormativity casts homosexuality as deviant, abnormal, and pathological—lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities are denied. Due to these normative assumptions, people who identify or behave as a deviant “other” face discrimination and harassment. In the prevailing heteronormative model, heterosexual sexuality is not only assumed but also understood to be static and universal.

Like men in a gender binarist, patriarchal social structure, heterosexuals are privileged over homosexuals, bisexuals, and asexuals. Heterosexuality is assumed and naturalized, whereas nonheterosexual identities are pathologized. Johnson observes that “heterosexuals are free to reveal and live their intimate relationships openly—by referring to their partners by name, recounting experiences, going out in public together, displaying pictures on their desks at work—without being accused of ‘flaunting’ their sexuality or risking discrimination” (p. 32). Heterosexuals can “turn on the television or go to the movies and be assured of seeing characters, news reports, and stories that reflect the reality of their lives,” and furthermore they can “live in the comfort of knowing that other people’s assumptions about their sexual orientation are correct” (p. 33). Like gender identity, sexuality is both a biological and social assembly process whereby vocabularies and classifications order and constrict the identities that are possible. Desires and attractions that individuals might experience are often silenced or go unrecognized because they do not conform to dominant discourses (Martin, K., 2009).

Heteronormativity is a system-wide issue that cannot immediately be fixed through a few changes in public settings and is a pervasive mindset that must be persistently challenged. Even open-minded individuals can still subconsciously overlook the struggles of lesbian, gay, transgender, transsexual, and other (LGBT+) persons in a world that bombards them with heteronormativity in media and social interactions on a daily basis (Johnson, 2001). Caregivers even assume heterosexual preference for their children as young as toddlers (ages 3–6), with very few presenting the possibilities of other sexualities or gender identities and thus not giving children the tools to accept these identities as they encounter them either internally or externally. Heteronormativity is often engrained from a very young age, making it difficult for LGBT+ youth to find understanding and acceptance of their identity either at home or in the larger world (Martin, K., 2009).

### SELF-ASSEMBLY, GENDER AND SEXUALITY, AND LIBRARIES

Libraries are similar to schools, doctors’ offices, and workplaces in terms of their techniques of power: libraries, like schools, represent sophisticated factories of the self, especially gender and sexual identities, but also including racial, age, and class identities. Technologies of discipline in the library include, for example,

- practices of bibliographic control that sort, order, manage, and retrieve subjects according to standardized languages (Bowker & Star, 1999; Drabinski, 2013; Krajewski, 2011; Olsen, 2002);
- social spaces that define and censor bodies according to the majority's dictates of "decency," "morality," and "taste" (Drabinski, 2008);
- private reading practices that circulate power relations through reflection and introspection of one's body (Chartier, 1989; Kropp & Halverson, 1983); and
- panoptic technologies like security cameras, magnetic sensors, mirrors, databases, and public terminals.

Through their diffuse techniques and practices—their mobile technologies of power—libraries define who is literate, who is underage, who is responsible, who is transient, who is eligible, and who is recalcitrant. Through the materials they house and circulate and the services they offer, libraries also confirm and identify who is straight, who is deviant, who is a girl. Through the reading practices they promote, libraries multiply the encounters of bodies with the disciplines that structure and regulate them (Chartier, 1989). Libraries, in one view, are institutions "designed to produce and reproduce the dominant effective culture" (Harris, 1986, p. 242). The culturally mediated vocabularies of sexuality and gender are central to the hegemonic structures that libraries perpetuate.

### HETERONORMATIVITY IN LIBRARY MEDIA

Libraries provide wide access to information, but the diversity of available information is often not representative of the population. While media continues to increase its representation of LGBT+ characters, these representations vary in their diversity and can be hampered by heteronormative views, perceptions, and expectations, perpetuating societal rejection and oppression. In these cases, the representations simply present yet another role that individuals are expected to portray in order to fit into the heteronormative definition of homosexuality. Lester (2014) notes that children's literature is a particularly crucial medium for realistic and diverse representation of all peoples in order to help children understand and accept the world around them, but that there are still gaps in representation. LGBT-themed books continue to perpetuate heteronormativity through socially acceptable expressions of homosexuality, such as gay men exhibiting feminine traits or gay women exhibiting masculine ones. While the existence of this literature creates a more inclusive environment, the difficulties in breaking away from heteronormativity still remain, skewing the perceptions of the public.

These issues exist outside of literature, making their way into all forms of media, to which many are exposed each day and that many libraries house or provide access to for their patrons. Many movies, advertise-



ments, and other media for public consumption rely upon heteronormativity from their audiences and, even in the recent past, have utilized nonconforming gender identities and expressions as a sign of abnormality or deviance (Ott & Mack, 2014). The children's animated film *The Lion King*, for example, codes its main villain, Scar, as abnormal by giving him many feminine features, especially when compared to his more masculine brother Mufasa, thus cueing the audience to associate his mannerisms with his inherent evil (Hahn, Allers, & Minkoff, 1994; Ott & Mack, 2014).

Heteronormativity does meet some conscious challenges in the media, however, supporting an overall societal change. The musical television series *Glee* provides a cast of characters that portray diverse experiences and expressions of gender and sexuality, as well as both positive and negative interactions with LGBT+ characters in a heteronormative world (Dhaenens, 2013). Another recent challenge to standards is the music video and song "Little Game" by Benny (Pierce), a 15-year-old artist. The message of the piece focuses on the societal pressures of gender roles, the negative repercussions of defiance to these norms, and the advocacy to actively pursue defiance. The overall subject lends credibility to the persistent issues of society for nonconforming youth.

### THE LGBT+ YOUTH EXPERIENCE AND POSITIVE SUPPORT

Studies on the experiences of LGBT+ youth in any environment often meet with challenges due to the nature of both the surveyed youth and the research itself (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2012). The most noted issue comes with the hesitation or even fear of self-identification for youth; reasons for this range from uncertainty of identity or orientation to perceived or actual harm that could be associated with peers discovering this identity. Thus the full measure of the LGBT+ youth experience cannot be obtained methodically, but research can glimpse the extent of any physical, social, or psychological harms that can occur for many LGBT+ youths.

Of the current general youth population, only 5–7 percent are self-identified as LGBT+, yet this population experiences a disproportionate amount of discrimination, harassment, violence, and abuse linked directly to their perceived or identified orientation (Shelton & Winkelstein, 2014). According to a survey conducted by GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) in 2009, approximately ninety percent of LGBT+ students in middle through high school "reported experiencing harassment at school"; thus, two-thirds of these harassed students noted that they felt that school was an unsafe environment, and thirty percent reported skipping school due to concerns about safety (Fredman, Schultz, & Hoffman, 2015). LGBT+ youth are more likely to experience mental health issues, bullying or harassment, suicidal attempts or thoughts, self-harm, and other challenges due to their sexual identity (Vincent, 2013). LGBT+ youth victims of bullying, harassment, or abuse and who lack positive support



or other resources are at high risk for engaging in behaviors that further stresses health and mind (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2012).

Libraries and other institutions can combat this through an accepting framework and mindset, as discussed in this study. There has been a correlation between school libraries offering access to LGBT+ resources and lower reports of this population having depressive episodes or suicidal intentions. Mental and physical health can be positively influenced by access to information, which either suggests or creates a positive environment. Through information services and supportive environments, libraries and schools can positively impact the quality of life of LGBT+ youth, and thus librarians can work to be visible advocates for those experiencing such difficulties; a supportive environment for these individuals results in an increase in the quality of life (Shelton & Winkelstein, 2014).

### SELF-ASSEMBLY, GENDER AND SEXUALITY, AND READERS' ADVISORY

Readers' advisory for young readers represents a conspicuous yet often overlooked technique of self-assembly in libraries, particularly as it relates to gender and sexuality. Readers' advisory is a kind of reference interview where library visitors consult with librarians to find reading and viewing materials. Readers' advisory may occur through direct interactions with librarians, whether face to face or virtually, or library visitors may consult library-generated lists, guides, or displays (Dilevko & Magowan, 2007; Saricks, 2005). Although often classified as a public library service, readers' advisory also occurs in school libraries, and while Dilevko and Magowan and Saricks associate readers' advisory with continuing adult education, readers' advisory is a service often offered to young readers. Some authors write specifically about readers' advisory for young readers, including children, 'twens (Peck, 2010), and teens (Booth, 2007); however, these mainstream works overlook the significance of gender and sexuality in readers' advisory encounters. Readers' advisory for young readers is often glossed over in library literature, and even when it is discussed, the literature is largely silent on the role that readers' advisory plays in the assembly of gendered and sexual selves.

Studies that discuss intersections of gender and sexuality and libraries often overlook readers' advisory and instead focus on collection development, access, challenges to collections, and the internet (Greenblatt, 2011; Naidoo, 2012). Still, several studies address readers' advisory for young readers as it relates to gender and sexuality. Literature about readers' advisory that does discuss gender and sexuality and young readers raises several issues:

- Gender stereotypes, sex, and sexualization in youth literature (Heller & Storms, 2013; Kokkola & Österlund, 2014; Luyt, Lee, & Yong, 2011)

- Transgender and transsexual characters and readers (Bott, 2014; Brendler, 2014; Miller, 2014; Sokoll, 2013)
- Gendered reading and learning practices (Fleming-Fido, 2004)
- Transvestism (Moore, 2013)
- Gender and book preferences (Brendler, 2014; Koblinsky & Cruse, 1981; Koblinsky, Cruse, & Sugawara, 1978; Langerman, 1990; Lukoff, 2013)
- The gender gap and boys' reading (Parsons, 2004; Scott, 2014; St. Lifer, 2004; Tanner, 2013; Welldon, 2005)
- Restrictive gender and sexual stereotypes (Kuon & Weimar, 2009; McCleary & Widdersheim, 2014)

This literature reveals that readers' advisory for young readers is multifaceted in terms of its relationships to gender- and sexual-identity formation. Nonetheless, the question of how, exactly, readers' advisory services assemble a reader's gender and sexual identity deserves further interrogation. It is crucial to ask what problems exist and how might they be overcome.

#### PROBLEMS WITH EXISTING READERS' ADVISORY PRACTICES

Some writers have begun taking a critical view of prevailing readers' advisory practices. This study contributes to the ongoing discussion about critical approaches to readers' advisory. Writers who discuss such advisory in a critical way view it as an inherently gendered and sexual encounter, one that might inadvertently fix, sort, or assign labels to young readers' based on the gender, sex, and sexual identities that librarians perceive. Several studies point out the restrictive gender and sexual stereotypes perpetuated in children's literature, and the effects that these representations have on young readers. Kropp and Halverson (1983) find that "one potentially influential source of sex-role information comes from exposure to traditional sex-typed models in children's books," but at the same time, "sex roles as portrayed in children's literature are unnecessarily rigid and present a narrow view of reality which may restrict children's views of men's and women's roles" (p. 262). In response to rigid classification schemes and the perceived conformity of young readers to them, Koblinsky et al. (1978) recommend that "projects designed to expand role options must deal directly with children's prior expectations or their structures for organizing and comprehending the world around them" (p. 457). These studies suggest that young readers' interactions with texts and the library techniques that structure them form a critical juncture in the self-assembly of the gendered and sexual selves of young readers.

Several authors acknowledge the power and privilege manifested by librarians who interact with young readers while providing readers' advisory services. Readers' advisory, in this view, becomes a site of conflict and contestation potentially leading to counterknowledges and/or dis- or reassemblages of young readers' selves. Lukoff (2013) and Scott (2014)

argue against the normalization and essentialization of dominant gender and sexual identities during the readers' advisory process. Lukoff recommends that "going beyond the concept of 'boy books' and 'girl books' can open readers up to a wide range of experiences that transcend gender identity and assignment" (p. 633). Brendler (2014) concurs, stating that "we will continue to see males and females that corroborate the gendered reading model; however, if we pay attention, we will begin to notice all the variations within gender" (p. 224). These librarians have called attention to a fluid and undefined understanding of the self: the self as an agent rather than subject.

Fluid and flexible readers' advisory practices might be better imagined after first conceptualizing gender- and sexual-identity formation as a dynamic process. Library practices could then be reconfigured to reflect this process. Regarding the process of gender development, Fausto-Sterling (2012a) says writes:

Consider . . . that the nervous system is only one player in a jazz improv group. The music results from a continued give and take between the player, a continuous interaction between the nervous system, the rest of the body and the environment. If gender identity were the performance piece it would succeed or fail based on the contributions of all the instruments in the band, how they integrate into a coherent system and how the couplings ebb and flow during the time course of the performance. . . . Gender identity is located in all three interacting networks, a product of the coupling of critical systems. . . . Not a thing, gender identity is a pattern in time. In any one individual, it is shaped by the preceding dynamics and becomes the basis of future identity transformations. (p. 405)

Gender development, in this view, is a continuous process of play and transformation among various actors: one's body, one's mind, and one's surroundings. Gender identity may stabilize, but it is never fixed. Harris (2005) calls gender-identity formation a process of "soft assembly":

Brought into an intense, embodied responsiveness and contact with the material world, caught up in the conscious and unconscious reverie of parents, prenatally already an object of intense fantasy, a child finds the experience of self within a relationship in which he or she is already seen. . . . The internalization . . . of the gender/body mirror becomes a part of the child's procedural knowing, available for many complex remappings and reassemblies in the course of development. (pp. 180–181)

In terms of sexuality, Fausto-Sterling (2012b) argues that categories of sexuality do not transcend time and culture; like gender identities, sexual identities are often contingent and provisional in individuals, as well as in collectives. Sexual identities are often messy and may not correspond with sexual desires or sexual behaviors (p. 85). Should sexual identity be framed by one's own sex traits (man or woman) or to which sex one

is attracted (man or woman)? Should sexuality be defined biologically, psychologically, socially, or anthropologically? Fausto-Sterling shows that there is no easy way to pin down, define, and study sexuality. For both Fausto-Sterling (2012a, 2012b) and Harris (2005), gender identity is provisional, fluid, and subject to revision; for Fausto-Sterling (2012b), sexuality is nearly impossible to capture.

One challenge for library services such as readers' advisory is to reflect the fluid and uncategorizable nature of gender and sexuality. Readers' advisory services must somehow reflect the miscellaneous, disordered, and messy reality of gender and sexuality (Weinberger, 2007) and encourage young readers to leave open possibilities for dis- and reassembling their selves in novel ways (Brand, 1995). One sometimes overlooked aspect of readers' advisory as it is portrayed in the literature is that it serves both groups and individuals. For example, Greenblatt (2011) recognizes that at a structural level, libraries must promote services for underserved gender and sexual groups; at the same time, at the service level, individuals cannot be reduced to group identity. While librarians and other service providers of the capitalist welfare state must recognize the modes of oppression of nondominant groups—groups that are oppressed because of race, sex, sexuality, age, gender, size, and other characteristics—members within these collectives must also be recognized as individuals.

Young (1990) suggests that for social agency services like those found in libraries to occur justly, gender and sexual minorities must influence the decision-making procedures, division of labor, and culture of the organization as it exists as a quasi-state institution, a workplace, and an information service provider. Yet to conceptualize and advertise services *for* gays, *for* lesbians, and *for* trans and pan-gender visitors can be problematic for librarians providing services because using categories to sort and fix people's identities inadvertently essentializes and stereotypes these individuals, marks them out as abnormal, and makes invisible the differences that exist among groups and individuals. In other words, there is a tension between serving marginalized groups (at an institutional, structural level) and serving individuals (at a person-to-person, service level), between recognizing and serving underrepresented groups and perpetuating existing fixities. Trying to serve marginalized genders and sexual groups may in the end reproduce the exact structural traits that cause violent and inhuman self-assembly. A just readers' advisory service must somehow both recognize and transcend dominant structures of gender and sexuality.

Gender and sexual identities are not static; they mutually overlap and often intersect with identities of race, sex, ability, class, and other characteristics. One dilemma for readers' advisory services is how to acknowledge and support marginalized social collectives and disrupt normative violence on the one hand, and how to avoid stereotyping, essentializing, and homogenizing individuals within groups with nondominant gender

and sexual identities on the other. Librarians and writers about readers' advisory services must avoid the "cultural imperialism" that marks as "other," stereotypes, and erases differences among individuals in marginalized groups (Lugones & Spelman, 1983). There needs to be a more personalized service approach that does not resort to stereotypes and that views gender and sexuality in a fluid, open-ended way. How can readers' advisory serve to creatively disassemble the scientific discourses that sort and organize bodies?

Another problem with readers' advisory is that the approaches isolate nondominant groups as requiring special needs but do little or nothing to subvert hegemonic cultural practices in the dominant culture. For example, professional textbooks on LGBT+ services such as the work by Greenblatt (2011) make it seem as though such services are isolated or reserved only for populations who identify as LGBT+, not straight populations. The point is that a critical advisory approach should not only meet the needs of special groups but also disrupt oppressive practices perpetuated by dominant groups. As stated above, the literature indicates that there are six main categories of oppressive practices with respect to readers' advisory services that deserve attention: *essentialization*, *assignment*, *othering*, *cultural imperialism*, *tokenism*, and *complicity*.

#### *Essentialization*

*Essentialization* means that gender and sexual identities are understood as discrete, mutually exclusive, static categories instead of fluid and overlapping experiences. Labels like gay, lesbian, trans\*, and bi straightjacket the individuals to whom they refer. Essentialization is a form of stereotyping and homogenizing people by sorting them into groups. This sorting results in an erasure of difference and silencing of individuality. When librarians refer to "readers' advisory for queer kids," for example, they group all the kids who may identify as queer into a category, as if their desires and interests were all the same. Libraries must recognize queer kids as an underserved group, but avoid homogenizing them. Martin and Murdock (2004) meticulously argue how labels are increasingly problematic for queer teens, who use terms as various as "punk cool," "down low," "happy," and "veronica-sexual" (pp. 10–11). Later, in their discussion of readers' advisory services to teens, Martin and Murdock encourage librarians to try to pin down what young readers "are" in terms of gender and sexuality (p. 50).

#### *Assignment*

*Assignment* means that a guess or presumption is made regarding a young reader's gender or sexual identity, and that this guess or presumption informs the recommendation of a book that corresponds to it. This practice is problematic because it assumes not only that self-identity is fixed and

knowable but also that the reader only prefers to read about certain genders or sexualities. The books for boys' discourse is one example of the problem of assignment (Scott, 2014). Having reading lists advertised as girl books or boy books or as books for questioning teens is problematic. By encouraging this sort of gender binary, libraries limit the potential of young readers' development, as well as their concept of themselves as an individual (Brendler, 2014, p. 224). These books may be *about* girls or boys or queers, but how can the library know that they are *for* these groups?

### *Othering*

*Othering* involves treating queer or seemingly queer readers as deviant, abnormal, or pathological. The practice of othering with respect to gender and sexuality is guided by an ideology of heteronormativity and gender binarism. Saying that "readers' advisory and reference interviews with LGBT+ teens are a little different than offering the same services to straight teens" (Martin & Murdock, 2004, p. 49) is an example of the problem of othering. Othering means to box, package, and straightjacket with a label, to set apart from a norm. Martin and Murdock urge practicing librarians to attune their "gaydar" to pick up on subtle cues during the reference interview: "When Heather uses the word 'different,' your 'gaydar'—the ability to spot a queer person—might have perked up, but you should never look at a kid like Heather, assess that she is queer, and then say, 'Oh, you want lesbian books, right?' Instead, your job is to give her the information she asks for, as well as information you think she might like" (p. 50). But is Heather queer? Is she a lesbian? Or is she bi? Can she be both queer and nonqueer? The recourse to labels does not seem to accomplish anything in the readers' advisory interview; identifying Heather as "different-from-normal" does not help the librarian provide her with books.

### *Cultural Imperialism*

*Cultural imperialism* (Lugones & Spelman, 1983) is a combination of othering and essentializing. First, a librarian might mark as different a person based on perceived group identity—for instance, as a homosexual. The librarian might then essentialize or stereotype the individual based on the group label "homosexual," as if there were no differences between gay boys and lesbian girls, or even between different gay boys or different lesbian girls. The general term *lesbian*, for example, when used as a catch-all, presumes whiteness and inadvertently silences the different experiences of black lesbianism or lesbians of different ages. Different characteristics of the self, such as race, class, age, and size, intersect in different ways with gender and sexual identity, and these differences must not be silenced. Cultural imperialism is doubly violent because it marks as deviant and silences the other. Librarians must recognize that a young reader who identifies as bisexual, who is a woman and is black, inhabits a very different

positionality than a bisexual who is a white man. Bisexuality, in this case, offers an important though limited understanding of the person.

### *Tokenism*

*Tokenism* relies upon essentializing and othering in order to be politically correct through a system of inclusion. The recommendation to “make sure to include a queer book in the mix of titles that you hand to kids” is an example of this problem (Martin & Murdock, 2004, p. 49).

### *Complicity*

Finally, *complicity* is the failure to actively challenge hegemonic structures of gender and sexuality. Readers’ advisory services meant to cater specifically to LGBT+ youth, for example, miss the point that everyone should be challenged to interrogate patriarchy, heteronormativity, the two-sex regime, and gender binarism in the selection of a book. Martin and Murdock (2004) consider a situation where a boy is joking with his friends about an LGBT+ title he found on the shelf. The authors recommend that librarians turn the situation into a teachable moment by explaining that “you [the librarian] were not making any assumptions about the teen’s sexuality and that, in fact, you provide all teens with LGBTQ titles” (p. 51). This “teachable moment” does nothing to combat heteronormativity, and the librarian’s reaction seems defensive, as if the librarian is forced to provide queer materials even though the target population is deviant.

## DISJUNCTIONAL ADVISORY

Some authors in library literature suggest that a possibility has been created for a critical advisory approach—a critical library pedagogy—that positions gender and sexuality at the forefront of readers’ advisory practices while at the same time interrogates hegemonic techniques of power. In other words, there seems to be an opening for a counterdiscourse of readers’ advisory that serves as an alternative to dominant gender and sexual identities, one that allows for creative disassembly of the self in terms of gender and sexual identity and the dominant structures that assemble these selves. This new approach to readers’ advisory might try to accomplish several things:

- To understand identity as “an ambivalent site, provisional and contingent” (Keilty, 2009, p. 3276), as a flexible and dynamic arrangement
- To challenge heteronormativity, patriarchy, and gender and sex binaries
- To avoid the symbolic violence of assigning readers to predefined categories
- To de-essentialize the reading preferences of readers of various gender, sex, and sexual identities



- To recommend reading materials across the spectrums of gender, sex, and sexuality to all readers
- To promote identification with all genders, sexes, and sexualities
- To transcend tokenist or "separate but equal" collections and services by providing universal services to straight, queer, trans\*, and androgynous visitors
- To encourage self-assembly that is open-ended, individualized, and personal

Is there an approach to readers' advisory that might achieve all these goals? What might it look like? How might librarians think about it? In response to the shortcomings of earlier readers' advisory models, we propose that librarians borrow from the language of poststructuralism, deconstruction, feminism, and queer theory by conceiving of readers' advisory as "disjunctional."

Disjunctional advisory does not label, prescribe, assign, or fix readers into slots; gender, sex, and sexual preference are inherently fluid and changing categories; it does not essentialize gender roles or sexual preferences and avoids committing symbolic violence by fixing and packaging library visitors into discrete identities; gender and sexuality are seen not as attributes or assignments, but dynamic processes that may shift and change. Because of this dynamic understanding of gender and sexuality, self-assembly is a continuous process of becoming. Young readers continuously renegotiate, disassemble, and reassemble their selves in an open-ended process. This understanding of sexuality and gender better aligns with feminist trends in adolescent psychology (Striepe & Tolman, 2003). As an amendment to Rose's and Foucault's seemingly determinist understanding of self-assembly, disjunctional advisory understands the self as a text that is actively remixed and constructed (Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2007).

We believe that librarians should view themselves, their interactions with children, and the materials they recommend to children as critical components in the development of children's gender identity and sexuality. Librarians involved in readers' advisory to young readers can play a critical role in a disjunctional interaction of creative self-assembly. Rather than give young readers predefined forms of gender and sexuality and expect the readers to function according to those forms, in disjunctional readers' advisory, librarians supply young readers with a wide range of options, and leave it to the readers to figure out how to construct the puzzle. Libraries can be a safe environment for self-assembly and exploration, as previously mentioned; librarians can assist in creating a safe environment by fostering a wide range of options, such as, for example, presenting key vocabulary to patrons, including *gay*, *transgender*, *asexual*, and so forth. A safe space can also be facilitated through either passive or active readers' advisory alongside a solid collection-development plan. Those who have

not developed a vocabulary to define how they feel can feel separated from society and even an unintentional outcast because they have nowhere to fit in among their peers. By raising awareness of all gender identities and sexualities and presenting them as possibilities, librarians present options to young readers struggling with the acceptance of their identity and also send a message of tolerance. Disjunctional advisory challenges ideological, preformed constructions and femininity and masculinity.

We think “disjunctional” is an attractive word for readers’ advisory because it is inherently ambiguous—it is Janus-faced. The term *disjunction* refers to the word *or*, but *or* can have two meanings: on its one side, the disjunctional *or* implies a disunion or disassociation between two or more things that are not connected; this sense of *or* is mutually exclusive. Corresponding to this first reading, disjunctional advisory implies a break or rupture with the past, a new thinkable imaginary for readers’ advisory, one that leaves gender and sexuality open-ended and undefined rather than closed and determined. Disjunctional advisory forgets past practices in which gender and sexuality were identities to be managed and sorted out by librarians making recommendations. As a countertechnique to the hegemonic machines of self-assembly, disjunctional advisory attempts to dissociate the library and reading practices from the dominant technologies that regulate gender and sexuality.

The second side of disjunctional advisory refers to the second meaning in disjunction: the inclusive *or* that is used as a logical operator. In a logical operation that is disjunctional in an inclusive sense, the disjunction operator *or* produces a true result when any of the values in the operation is true. Similarly, in grammar, *or* in the inclusive sense connects two or more simultaneously possible ideas: either of the possibilities could be true, or both could be true. This meaning of disjunctional is attractive because it implies that self-identities of gender, sex, and sexuality can co-exist and overlap. The term *disjunctional* in this sense also implies that while possible selves are sometimes exclusive, overlapping, and nonmutually exclusive, they are in any case also true for the individual in question. This suggests that the self-assemblages of young readers with regard to their gender and sexual identities can be contradictory, confused, and nascent. The inclusive and ambivalent sense of inclusive disjunctuality implies that gender and sexuality cannot be pinned down, assigned, or labeled; the vague and imprecise nature of the disjunction in disjunctional advisory is an attempt to celebrate the complexity and indeterminacy of self-identities. Acknowledgment of the dynamic, conditional, and multiple identities of young readers opens up space for their creative self-expression, experimentation, discovery, and novelty.

Finally, we believe that *disjunctional* is an attractive term for a new approach to readers’ advisory because it is closely related in sound and mean-

ing to terms like *disruption* and *dysfunctional*. Disjunctive advisory is a playful, irreverent, and imaginative outlook on the roles of libraries in the self-assembly of young readers. Disjunctive contrasts with a sometimes restrictive and repressive traditional library atmosphere. We propose that disjunctive advisory exhibits four features or characteristics: *imprecision*, *disorderliness*, *irresolvability*, and *nonautomaticity*.

#### *Imprecision*

The disjunctive *or*, the Boolean operator that librarians know so well from search strings, precludes precision and favors recall. Disjunctive advisory maximizes recall and reduces precision in the sense that the self-assemblages of young readers can be more than one thing, undefined. Disjunctive advisory invites readers to consider all possible worlds; it is inclusive and expansive, allowing for "either . . . or" as well as "both . . . and." The readers' advisory we propose promises no clear synthesis and no right answer (Tschumi, 1994, p. 212).

#### *Disorderliness*

The real, messy assembled selves formed out of disjunctive advisory explode standardized languages of catalogs and classifications. A disordered and nonorganized approach challenges binary notions of gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity. This new understanding of readers' advisory promotes dislocation, confusion, ambiguity, exploration, and destabilization; it works beyond the boundaries of order (Tschumi, 1994, p. 210). One way it does this is by disassociating perceived gender, sex, and sexuality from the reading preferences of young readers. A disjunctive approach acknowledges that young readers may enjoy titles about characters of any sex, sexuality, and gender. Readers' advisory is an entirely gendered, sexed, and sexual encounter for young readers, but because these characteristics of young readers and their reading preferences are fluid, these characteristics of the book do not matter as much as the quality of the story.

#### *Irresolvability*

Reference interviews of a disjunctive advisory form have no resolution, no ending; disjunctive advisory encourages a continuous search for new discoveries. Librarians, on this view, assume that young readers possess agency and therefore provide a space for them to explore, construct, and individualize gender and sexuality rather than to conform to established forms. There is no established method for constructing an identity (Tschumi, 1994, p. 212). Likewise, for the librarian there is no formula or rule for how to go about the advisory process.

*Nonautomaticity*

Librarians who use a disjunctional approach utilize provisional, ready-at-hand, impromptu, and spontaneous methods. The approach is personal; lists and searches may be used, but the organic and personal nature of disjunctional advisory tends toward innovation and creativity. The organic interactions in disjunctional spaces provide a useful break from business-like efficiency and bureaucratic anonymity. Disjunctional advisory is lifelike, favoring recombination and novelty over established forms and functions (Tschumi, 1994, p. 212).

**CONCRETE STRATEGIES FOR CREATIVE (DIS)ASSEMBLY**

The above description of disjunctional advisory is somewhat vague and detached from actual library practices. What might this service look like on the ground? In practice, libraries can apply small shifts in vocabulary, presentation, and interaction in order to provide disjunctional advisory. By synthesizing academic analysis and personal experience, librarians may implement readers' advisory in an inclusive manner.

*Emphasis on Story Quality*

The first suggestion for a disjunctional advisory approach is to recommend literature based on the quality of the story, not the gender or sexuality of its characters, and not based on the perceived gender or sexuality of readers. Leave room for multiple masculinities and multiple femininities. Several authors in the literature have already suggested this approach to readers' advisory, including Lukoff (2013) and Scott (2014). Brendler (2014) suggests that young readers increasingly read across traditional lines of gender and sexuality. Suggesting books across fixed lines of gender and sexuality disrupts the oppressive culture of labeling, sorting, and marking out selves. The same holds true for sexuality. Striepe and Tolman (2003), two developmental psychologists, suggest that

the current social imperative to fit a person into a sexual orientation category may deny the reality of young people's experiences with sexual and romantic feelings. Such categorization, of self and of others, may heighten the degree of limits and demands that adolescents face while striving to develop a sexual identity. . . . Femininity and masculinity ideologies are part of the developmental process. (p. 529)

*Knowledgeability about Gender and Sexuality*

Another suggestion for a critical readers' advisory is for librarians to be able to talk to parents and kids about gender and sexuality. Librarians hold positions of power, and as perceived experts they could use their positions for counterhegemonic ends. For example, librarians could become conversant in the discourse of feminist child and adolescent psychology that challenges the dominant "this-or-that-ism" and instead understands

gender and sexual development as a process of movement, resistance, and confusion (Striepe & Tolman, 2003).

*Challenge Binarism, Heteronormativity, and Patriarchy*

A third suggestion is that librarians could actively interrogate gender and sexual norms, heteronormativity, and patriarchal scripts. When a young reader or their parent asks for a boy book, for example, the librarian could ask what that means. If the child follows up with "a book about trucks," the librarian could then recommend several quality books with this interest in mind, featuring female or male protagonists. A strategy like this is a subtle though active subversion of gender stereotypes. Even a single noun, such as *trucks*, *unicorns*, or *superheroes*, allows the librarian to hone in on the actual interests of the reader and subconsciously push library patrons away from seeing reading as gender-normed.

*Open-Ended Interviews*

Another method to coax reluctant readers or shy patrons into readers' advisory may be to open a discussion about book topics and allow *them* to narrow the search. A librarian confronted with a young reader who does not know what she or he wants in a book may feel stuck because the reader's interests cannot be ascertained. This is a great opportunity to introduce genres or topics. By starting broad, such as asking whether the reader enjoys "realistic," "weird," or "fantasy" stories, the librarian is thus able to lead toward exploring her or his own preferences, creating more independent readers comfortable within the library environment.

For instance, Melissa, who is a youth librarian, experienced this dilemma with a young male reader who had not read much in the past but was starting to show an interest. Melissa and the reader narrowed down that he loved fantasy stories, particularly ones with magical creatures, so Melissa verbally presented several options at his reading level while tracking down the books in the library. One option was *Phoebe and Her Unicorn: A Heavenly Nostrils Chronicle*—an imaginative, graphic-novel fairy tale, which the boy loved (think *Captain Underpants* with more magic). His mother raised no comments regarding the topic of unicorns or the prominent color of pink, but was simply happy that her son had found a book to be excited about. This is a scenario in which setting aside conscious or subconscious conclusions regarding reader interest worked well for all parties and helped interest a patron in reading.

*Recommend Nondominant Works*

Another option for critical readers' advisory is that librarians might avoid recommending books that reproduce gender and sexual stereotypes. The books that librarians recommend rest on political decisions about what kind of culture to produce. Librarians could challenge young men to

question what it means to be a man—whether it means acting the predator, telling women what to do, or not showing emotion; librarians could challenge young women to question what it means to be a woman—whether it means playing the good-girl role and acting as property (Striepe & Tolman, 2003). Even if it is not said directly, it is possible to recommend books that relate beneficial stories about these struggles.

*Promote Anonymity and Privacy*

How might readers' advisory better serve young readers who are coming out or questioning their gender or sexuality? Questioning in terms of gender may mean experimenting with a new look, and questioning sexuality may mean experiencing feelings of attraction to different sexes. Coming out can be a difficult and confusing time for some teens because they may feel isolated or abnormal; if they come out, they risk losing friends or becoming an outcast, but if they self-silence, they risk losing a part of themselves. What role might readers' advisory play in this process?

Libraries are important sources of information for questioning youth, but the attractiveness of the library in this case relies heavily upon its anonymous nature (Curry, 2005). Questioning readers may not approach the reference desk, and it is at least ambiguous whether librarians should seek them out. For questioning young readers, it may be preferable to fall back on indirect means, such as lists or displays that include stories about these topics.

At her library, Melissa maintains a large and diverse collection of book lists in the young adult section based on genre, subject, and other characteristics that teens may gravitate toward. For instance, along with "Books That Make You Reach for the Kleenex" (sad or tragic books) and "Awesome Adventures" (featuring a variety of characters and situations that are adventurous), there are also lists for those interested in coming-of-age stories to provide a mirror or a window to their own lives. These topics include "Stories of Coming Out" and "Quests to Find Their Identity."

*Create an Inclusive Atmosphere*

It may also help to create an atmosphere conducive to questioning teens, with signs, contact lists, and web pages containing information about local gay and straight alliances (GSAs); the local chapter of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN); gay and lesbian community centers; and help hotlines. Creating a safe space could increase visits to the reference desk. Creating an atmosphere like this in the library, as well as a collection that meets the diverse needs of youth in terms of gender- and sexual-identity construction, means becoming educated about what these diverse needs are and which resources address them. Librarians can begin to move away from cultural barriers and toward their readers' interests by

becoming more aware of their own actions and the effects they have on young patrons (Lukoff, 2013).

## CONCLUSION

The idea of machines and assemblages seems deterministic and counter-intuitive to how our individual self seems self-chosen, how we appear to manifest agency through the choices we make, how we live day to day. While power and assemblage make the construction of the self seem like a passive and predetermined process, it is useful to keep in mind that the notion of *power* implies counterpower, and the notion of *assembly* implies dis- and reassembly. It seems possible that counterinstitutions, counterdiscourses, and countertechniques could exist within a semideterministic view of self-assembly as described by Rose (1997) and Foucault (1995, 2000). In the end, libraries can go either way: they can reproduce hegemony or challenge it; they can cause teens to continue to self-silence or foster an open atmosphere. We argue that readers' advisory can transform libraries from what Harris (1986, p. 242) calls "institutions designed to produce and reproduce the dominant effective culture" to what McLuhan (1995, p. 3) calls institutions conducive to the "reorganization of imaginary life." We envision the library as a place to imagine, understand, and identify with different kinds of relationships and different assemblages of the self.

The potential for liberatory library pedagogy has become thinkable as a result of the confluence of multiple factors—cultural, political, social, economic. Young readers not only increasingly accept but also increasingly prefer to read about the lives of lesbian, gay, bi\*, trans\*, and androgynous characters (Bogino, 2011; Bott, 2014; Brendler, 2014). Young readers increasingly identify as alternative or unspecified genders and sexualities, and their parents increasingly support the gender- and sex-queer identities their children construct (Breton, 2013) and the queer reading habits of children, even if they do not identify as queer. Librarians have started to encourage young readers to read about queer characters. Queer rights discourse, especially the gay marriage rights movement, has de-privileged heteronormativity and secured legal rights for nondominant sexual preferences. Finally, the publishing industry now increasingly markets books with queer characters in primary or secondary roles (Brendler, 2014). Recent transformations and new imaginaries that occur at the intersection of gender and sexuality and libraries are products of all these shifts.

These progressive trends notwithstanding, critical, liberatory readers' advisory exists forever in tension with the hegemonic state and its economic imperatives. These imperatives hijack gender and sexuality frameworks to produce selves oriented toward competition, consumerism, and enterprise. Conceptions of reading and libraries that consider reading performance and literacy important only for system imperatives devalue



the liberatory potential of libraries and the reading experience (St. Lifer, 2004). As we have tried to show in this paper, libraries can overcome system imperatives. Disjunctive advisory provides an opportunity for librarians to model to young readers how to avoid labeling, classifying, and sorting people into predefined boxes. This is important not only because it avoids directly marginalizing selves but also because it could swell the ranks of those who become allied with queerness. We have tried to emphasize the cultural, social, and political importance of libraries in terms of gender and sexuality.

More work needs to be done to explore to what extent and in what ways readers' advisory works in practice, and to what degree the problems we identified in library literature occur in libraries. Future research could utilize surveys, interviews, and onsite observations to gather data on readers' advisory approaches. Content analysis could be used to study reading lists and LibGuides. The guides and lists that are available on libraries' websites could serve as data sources. One potential approach to the study of readers' advisory is ethnography; readers' advisory interactions could be conceptualized as *critical incidents* in library cultures. Crisp, Lister, and Dutton (2005) define such incidents as routine events in everyday practices that, when reflected on, reveal underlying motives, structures, or meanings (p. 6). Critical incident reports have been used successfully in a number of studies of schools, organizations, and cultural events to identify key moments to record in observations, elicit dialogue from interviewees, and present findings (Angelides, 2001; Angelides & Gibbs, 2006; Byrne, 2001; Hanuscin, 2013; Musanti & Pence, 2010; Porter, 1995; Sloan & Oliver, 2013). A critical incident framework could be used to study how practicing librarians implement readers' advisory for young readers in terms of gender and sexuality. Future work on readers' advisory could consider directions like these.

fAe is the main character of the documentary film *Gender Redesigner*. Throughout his childhood and into college years, fAe presented a female gender and tried to conform to female scripts. This gender identity did not fit him. He finally came to realize that his identity and desires were those of a man, even if biologically he was a woman. To some degree, fAe thought he was a weirdo for living as a transsexual and undergoing sexual reassignment surgery, but in another sense he realized that the transition was a natural process for him (Bergmann & Paull, 2010). Using fAe's story as an allegory of what it means to be human, the purpose of disjunctive advisory is to recognize and naturalize human experiences that do not fit into current formalized codes—the experiences of those who are silenced or illegible within dominant gender and sexual classifications. The goal of disjunctive advisory is to raise young readers who recognize experiences like fAe's as the norm, not the exception.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank Olga Kuchinskaya and Leanne Bowler for their helpful feedback and suggestions. This research was previously presented at the Gender and Sexuality in Information Studies Colloquium at the University of Toronto.

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