

Uncontrollable Vocabularies: Queer Theory, Sexual Identity, and the Catalog

Lynne Stahl

Wesleyan University Library

ABSTRACT: This article brings together critical librarianship and queer theory to intervene in ongoing discourse about subject headings related to sexual identity. While many librarians favor a corrective cataloging approach that updates language with more current and ostensibly community-preferred terms, I draw on work by Emily Drabinski, Melissa Adler, Eve Sedgwick, and Kadji Amin to argue against corrective approaches—and against a mindset that seeks affirmation in the catalog to begin with, rather than understanding any taxonomic project to be intrinsically fraught and reductive. The purpose of this article is threefold: 1) to elucidate and challenge what I call a “paradigm of exposure”—a form of “outing” texts—around Library of Congress Subject Headings that are related to sexual identity, 2) to illustrate the fundamental irreconcilability of queerness with the cataloging principle of “aboutness,” and 3) to argue for a dispositional shift that embraces an ambivalent relationship to the catalog even while permitting for good surprises. As a case study, I examine the application of the LCSH “Lesbians” and “Female friendships” to films and challenge the paradigm of exposure that characterizes prevalent approaches to cataloging LGBTQ-related materials.

Keywords: cataloging, critical librarianship, queer theory, academic libraries, Library of Congress Subject Headings, sexual identity



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Journal of Radical Librarianship, Vol. 10 (2024) pp.17-35. Published 12 March 2024.

Introduction

The diminution and euphemization of queer female sexuality is a cultural practice sufficiently prevalent to have become a running joke: “roommates,” “good friends,” “longtime companions,” the supposed phenomenon of “lesbian bed death,” and so on. While toggling, as I often find myself doing, between my interests in queer studies and in critical librarianship, one day I navigated to my institution’s WorldCat instance to see what Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) had been assigned to one of my favorite films, Donna Deitch’s *Desert Hearts* (1985), in which Vivian, a repressed English professor, travels to Reno, NV, for an expedited divorce only to become romantically entangled with a woman named Cay who works in a local casino. Its LCSH appeared as follows:

Figure 1

Screenshot of LCSH for Desert Hearts in WorldCat

Subjects:	Library of Congress Subject Headings Female friendship Nevada Reno Drama Lesbians Nevada Reno Drama Reno (Nev.) Drama
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To see a classic lesbian romance tagged with the subject heading “Female friendship” was therefore jarring. Was the main characters’ friendship—which might otherwise be described merely as the lead-up to their romantic entanglement—really a major aspect of the film? Didn’t the simultaneous use of “Female friendship” and “Lesbians” somehow detract from the latter, given that the film’s plot is explicitly about romance blossoming? As I searched for and found numerous other instances of the co-application of these terms, e.g., *Salmonberries* (1991), *Go Fish* (1994), *The World Unseen* (2007), *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (2013), *Vita & Virginia* (2018), and *Rafiki* (2018), more questions arose: What does the overlap in “lesbian” and “female friendship” subject headings “do” on taxonomic and epistemological levels? Does it diminish lesbian sexuality, or female sexuality more broadly? Does it subversively surface queer films for users seeking female buddy films? Does it evince a capacity of LCSH to convey temporal progression, particularly in cases where characters in a film begin as friends and become lovers?

Important library scholarship has shown the pernicious nature of certain subject headings and other aspects of cataloging and classification, including racial bias (e.g., Berman, 1971; Warner, 2001; Biswas, 2018; Howard and Knowlton, 2018; Lo, 2019); debasing, outdated language around gender, sex, and sexuality (e.g., Olson, 2001; Roberto, 2011; Watson, 2020; Henry et al., 2022); dis/ability (e.g., Adler, 2016; Sullivan, 2021); and the placement of books on queer topics next to books on pedophilia (e.g., Adler, 2017; Hobart, 2019) and so on. While these problems are broadly acknowledged, debates about how best to address them persist.

In this article, I focus less on the effects of offensive cataloging terms and more on the intersections of queer identity politics, taxonomic practices, and critical discourse within

librarianship. Concerned though it is with the topics, the article makes no attempt at an overarching theory of corrective cataloging, reparative metadata, or best practices regarding classification and/or subject analysis. Indeed, it doesn't presume that best practices for cataloging related to sexual identity are necessarily also best practices for cataloging related to race, indigeneity, (dis)ability, or even gender—though all of those intersecting facets must be considered when discussing sexual identity. Rather, it scrutinizes prevalent approaches to the politics of cataloging sexual identity and what I will call a paradigm of exposure that frequently characterizes them. The term “paradigm of exposure” draws from queer theorist Eve Sedgwick's (1990; 2003) work on the ways heteronormativity's mechanisms necessitate an active pronouncement of one's queerness in the face of presumed heterosexuality, her critique of work in lesbian and gay studies that takes the form of identifying and naming potential LGBT figures previously presumed to be straight, and Emily Drabinski's (2013) reminder that the way a problem is framed goes a long way in determining how it can be addressed. Like Sedgwick, I believe our affective relationship to our objects of critique demands thoughtful, ongoing consideration.

The purpose of this article is threefold: 1) to elucidate and challenge a paranoid mindset and accompanying paradigm of exposure around LCSH that are related to sexual identity, 2) to illustrate the fundamental irreconcilability of queerness with the cataloging principle of “aboutness,” and 3) to argue for a dispositional shift that embraces an agonistic relationship to the catalog even while permitting for good surprises. I frame these arguments in relation to three main points: the impossibilities that catalogers face, intersectional aspects of sexual identity and the catalog's inability to provide historical context, and problems of fixity inherent in any taxonomic project. My aim is not to offer an alternative solution (as if one individual could!) but to illustrate the intractable tensions surrounding the cataloging and discovery of queer materials and to argue for the importance of different ethical and affective approaches.

But what does it mean to adjust one's disposition when, at the end of the day, catalogers still need to do their jobs and users still need to find the items they seek? I recognize that the arguments this article makes may frustrate those tasked with cataloging work and those who undertake the labor of thoughtfully considering subject headings around sexual identity. Though I do not intend this piece as a polemic, I hope it demonstrates the variability and validity in different understandings of queerness—and that it engenders more discussion between librarians who catalog and those who work primarily in instructional capacities, as well as more discussion of metadata and its politics with library users.

Exposing bias in LCSH is a strategy that has become largely reflexive, and it has had important, humanizing outcomes, such as the revision of the “illegal aliens” subject heading. But exposing bias is not the only possible approach, and I would caution against what seems to be the installation of finding and changing objectionable subject headings as *the* way to address bias in cataloging. This mindset is symptomatic of what Sedgwick (2003) has called “paranoid reading.” This tautological practice of seeking out and finding precisely what one suspects already to exist characterized much early lesbian and gay studies scholarship, whose interventions too often take the form of interpreting plausible instances of homosexuality in literary works. In the context of queer-related materials, I seek to unsettle the presumption that catalogers recursively locating and replacing outdated terms with more precise, granular terms necessarily benefits the

communities it purports to. The matter goes far beyond good terms and bad terms and cannot be considered in isolation from the development—historical and ongoing—of sexual taxonomies and of queer theory. To that end, I extend Drabinski’s (2013) uptake of queer theory in relation to cataloging and classification. Drabinski’s call for a queer studies framework versus a more identitarian LGBT studies framework has not been taken up as fully as it might in cataloging practice or in the ways we address LCSH and other controlled vocabularies. I apply Drabinski’s advocacy for a queer approach to cataloging terminology to the determinations of aboutness that beget the use of such terminology—that is, not just what term to apply, but also how the decision to apply a term related to sexual orientation is made. Further, in framing the paradigm of exposure and application of sexuality-related LCSH as a form of “outing” (is a text “gay enough” to warrant a heading?) I consider what cataloging does to texts themselves, not just to the people who produce, seek, and consume them.

As one such seeker and consumer—a film-loving lesbian deeply familiar with and ambivalent about the numerous, often maddening tropes that populate LGBTQ cinema—I began this project from an admittedly paranoid standpoint. When I sought out *Desert Hearts* in the catalog, I did so with ample suspicion that I’d find something offensive. Sure enough (I might even have whispered “Gotcha!”) the film’s subject headings included both “Lesbians” and “Female friendship.” I had caught the catalog red-handed in the much-bemoaned practice of desexualizing women together, of equating lovers to roommates and eros to sororal love. Another quick search confirmed my corollary suspicion that neither *Moonlight* (2016) nor *Call Me by Your Name* (2017)—both high-profile films about men becoming sexually intimate with other men—had any friendship-related subject headings. But what did this discovery do other than confirm something I already knew: that female sexuality is often diminished and defanged in comparison to male sexuality? And more importantly, when and how did my default attitude toward the catalog become one of cynicism rather than one of an open, inquisitive mind? What might such a mind have seen in this set of subject headings?

Drabinski (2013) argues against the “solution” of constant updates, suggesting instead that the catalog offers a point of entry at which instruction librarians can discuss its flaws openly with users. While I wholeheartedly believe that dehumanizing language and slurs should be removed, the problems of context and subjectivity persist. For instance, while preferred by many, the reclaimed term “queer” remains a slur when uttered by someone with malicious intent. As the “Female friendship” example shows, the matter is not as simple as “good” terms vs. “bad” terms. What if, when we encounter some of these ruptures and gray areas, we permit for the chance of happy accidents or perverse pleasures—not just pointing out flaws in the catalog but embracing them as evidence of how much is uncontrollable, how much cannot be pinned down into hegemonic terms and structures? Suspicion is not paranoid if reality regularly bears out one’s fears, but pure cynicism is not conducive to structural change-making. I therefore consider affective questions on two levels: first, in allowing for the possibility of positive affect in uncorrected aspects of the catalog, and second, in suggesting that the putatively affirming experience of seeing one’s identity terms reflected in the catalog comes with dangerous implications. If we can accept as axiomatic that taxonomy is reductive and intrinsically anti-queer, we must question why we want the catalog’s affirmation and to what extent the harm-reduction approach of correction becomes a matter of respectability politics. Are we simply training users to demand more and more specific and binding identifications of one another, of

texts? By furnishing catalogers with “corrected” LCSH or more granular vocabularies (such as the Homosaurus), do we merely empower them to make an increasingly nuanced and complex series of qualifying determinations about texts and people?

Subject Analysis and Queerness

Subject cataloging is the step in which an item’s “aboutness” is decided—its “main subject” (Lazarinis, 2014). During the classification process, the identification of an item’s primary subject results in the assignment of a class number that in turn determines a call number. Subject headings, meanwhile, are assigned to designate additional concepts or topics that the item covers. Subject analysis entails conceptual analysis, or describing a resource’s aboutness, along with translation, or the conversion of an aboutness statement into a standardized form such as a controlled vocabulary (Holley & Joudrey, 2021, p. 160).

Subject headings offer a means of negotiating the fact that most items deal with more than one subject, whereas classification locates an item in one physical and disciplinary section of a library. Cataloging principles have evolved over time, from Charles Cutter’s rules to the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules to RDA and others in between, but virtually all iterations entail anticipating user needs and purposes. Per Cutter, subject headings should “enable a person to find a book when the subject is known,” and show “what the library has. . . on a given subject” (Cutter, 1904). In an open-access public catalog (OPAC), subject headings are a type of hyperlinked metadata that sends the user from one item with a given subject heading (or combination of headings) to every item within the OPAC with that heading (or combination of headings). While some (e.g., Haugen & Billey, 2020) view the greater interoperability and discovery capabilities of linked data compared to OPAC records as an avenue to more transparent and equitable cataloging, linked data does not fundamentally alter the taxonomic practices on which cataloging draws.

Ralph Holley and Daniel Joudrey (2021, p. 160) observe that “no single authoritative method for determining aboutness exists, and a group of catalogers may determine the aboutness of a single resource in myriad ways.” Within the body of literature on subject analysis, few works attempt to define aboutness. The term “aboutness” first appeared in library science contexts in the late 1960s as an attempt to “avoid dealing with the philosophical complexities that can be associated with the term *subject*” (p. 161). This attempt proved largely unsuccessful, as the terms tend to be treated as synonyms. Patrick Wilson, meanwhile, writes that instructional materials on subject analysis are “curiously uninformative about how one goes about identifying the subject of a writing” (1968, p. 73). A recent subject analysis textbook explains that catalogers should “assign one or more subject headings that best summarize the overall contents of the work. The aim is to provide access to the most important topics” (Ganendran & Farkas, 2007, p. 29). Such a decision entails significant interpretive labor of a nature that has stood as a point of contestation among queer scholars for years: what is queer content?

As Sedgwick (1990) illuminates, the mechanisms of heteronormativity function such that without a pronouncement to the contrary, heterosexuality is the presumed norm. In other words, as Samuel Edge (2019) notes, “heterosexuality is most often considered to be a fixed and permanent part of the work, rather than a frame or lens through which to view the work, which is often the case in works involving homosexuality or perceived homosexual elements” (83). In a

society where heterosexuality passes largely unmarked, the absence of a subject heading indicating some other sexual identity implicitly attributes heterosexuality to the content of the text and thereby reproduces heteronormative readings of that text. Is *Desert Hearts* any more about being a lesbian than, for example, the virginity-loss comedy *American Pie* (1999) is about being a straight man and a virgin? And yet neither the subject heading “Heterosexual men in motion pictures” nor “Virginity” is applied. Instead, “Teenage boys” and “Sexual behavior” are, framing heterosexuality merely as behavior rather than as a sexual identity. Sexual identity categories seem only to constitute “content” when they deviate from the presumed norm. This minoritizing approach spotlights nonheterosexual identity while allowing heterosexuality to remain invisible and naturalized (Christensen, 2008).

Library literature on nomenclature around sexual identity is conspicuously silent on questions of *how* catalogers identify queer content and the implications of these identificatory acts on both texts and users rather than *what* they call it. The LGBTQ community is not a monolith, nor are the catalogers making determinations on a text’s aboutness with regard to sexuality. The ways various forms of sexual identity are defined and adopted differ radically among queer theorists and catalogers—not to imply that the two are mutually exclusive—as well as lay users. The gap in library discourse indicates a troubling potential lack of consideration of the stakes of corrective cataloging and implies a presumption that catalogers will simply know queer content when they see it, when in fact queer theory maintains an ethos of constant flux and opacity. Questions of aboutness have haunted LGBT studies and queer studies, too, if in different terms than librarianship. As a field, lesbian and gay studies preoccupied itself primarily with visibility and representation—unearthing and identifying LGBT content or themes in older texts. This motivation, while not without merits, relied upon a particular disposition toward texts that Sedgwick describes as a “hermeneutics of suspicion” as conceptualized by Paul Ricoeur: I know there is a queer in this text and I am going to prove it (2003, p. 124). According to Sedgwick, whatever arguments can be made for the importance of representation, this paranoid approach ultimately “can’t do anything other than prove the same assumptions with which it began” even if it is “experienced by the practitioner as a triumphant advance toward truth and vindication” (p. 135).

Drabinski zeroes in on cataloging’s dilemma of reification: “from a queer perspective,” she writes, corrective approaches to cataloging “concede the terms of the knowledge organization project: that a universalizing system of organization and naming is possible” (2013, p. 96). While this iterative mode of cataloging may not be quite such a “project of fixity” as Drabinski (p. 96) suggests it to be, her point holds that it is nonetheless universalizing, even if the universalization is achieved via the concerted efforts and consensus of queer-identified catalogers. The approach she proposes is thus not primarily to correct problematic subject headings but to “highlight and exploit the ruptures in our classification structures. . . inviting resistance to rather than extension of” the systems a correction-based movement upholds (p. 96-97). What might resistance to universalizing systematicity look like? Or rather, what might it feel like? To confront this question, I enlisted the help of a metadata librarian, who isolated the ostensibly problematic Lesbian/Female friendship LCSH pairing through the following steps.

Data Extraction Methods

To retrieve the largest possible set of sample records whose subject headings could be compared

to the content of the works they described, the metadata librarian searched the entire WorldCat database available from OCLC Inc., which contains over 5 billion records (<https://www.oclc.org/en/worldcat/inside-worldcat.html>) for over 2.7 billion works contributed by librarians and information scientists at over 16,000 member institutions worldwide (<https://www.oclc.org/en/worldcat/library100/faq.html>). Using a local interface available to West Virginia University Libraries, she searched the "subject" index of this database for the official Library of Congress Subject Headings "Lesbians" and "Female friendship" to retrieve records with these strings in any field or subfield of Machine Readable Cataloging (MARC) designated as containing a "subject," i.e., "6XX" fields, regardless of correct schema indicators.

From two resulting sets of records, one each for "Lesbians" and "Female friendship," she selected records with a metadata header, or "leader," position 6 of "g," which codes for video. We normalized publication dates from two different fields in current and historic use, the 264 and 260, respectively. Our SQL code is provided in Figure 2, wherein the [001] field refers to a unique OCLC record identifier, the [245\$a] field contains the title, and the [000\$06] field refers to the metadata header position for formats including video, code "g."

Figure 2

SQL Code to Retrieve Video with "Lesbians" and/or "Female friendship" LCSH

```
SELECT DISTINCT ([001]) AS [OCLC Number], [245$a] AS Title, [Year]
```

```
FROM (SELECT DISTINCT([001]), [245$a],[264$c] AS [Year]
```

```
FROM OCLCRecords
```

```
WHERE [000$06] Like "g" AND [264$c] Not Like "
```

```
UNION
```

```
SELECT DISTINCT([001]), [245$a],[260$c] AS [Year]
```

```
FROM OCLCRecords
```

```
WHERE [000$06] Like "g" AND [260$c] Not Like "
```

```
UNION
```

```
SELECT DISTINCT([001]), [245$a],'N/A' AS [Year]
```

```
FROM OCLCRecords
```

```
WHERE [000$06] Like "g" AND ([260$c] Like " AND [264$c] Like ");
```

The results were 621 records for video in the “Lesbians” set and 599 in the “Female friendship” set. According to RDA rules, there is ideally one record for a given manifestation of a title, i.e., the edition of a work. The number of records generated for an edition of a work, however, depends on how many member institutions encounter the work, whether their workflows adequately check for and identify existing records, and whether they adhere to the RDA standard, which can depend on an edition’s popularity, circulation, and complexity as well as an institution’s human or other resources.

To check whether the subject headings for a given title or edition were accurate to the content of the work, rather than whether the subject headings in given records corresponded accurately, the metadata librarian deduplicated the sample on title and year, considering the combination of title and year to roughly capture edition, and on title alone. There were 524 unique editions and 411 unique titles assigned the subject heading “Lesbians.” There were 430 unique editions and 311 unique titles assigned “Female friendship.” Combining and listing headings for all records per edition and all editions per title would have been time-prohibitive, and the inquiry’s aim was to compare individual heading assignment to content for any given instance of a work. Retaining subject headings from the first edition or title per group of titles or records, respectively, therefore sufficed to investigate consistency, subjectivity, and reliability of individual catalogers’ judgment. Data points that appear in some instances and not others of the same work—or some editions and not others of the same title—especially over time might provide quantitative evidence of previous euphemistic heading application or increased emergence of sexual identities and terminology into the mainstream; a follow-up study using this methodology on the dataset is currently underway. We acknowledge the possibility that some of these subject headings may have changed since the dataset’s harvest in 2021.

Data Analysis

Even in this relatively small dataset, abundant idiosyncrasies emerged within the application of subject headings. Many of these spoke to tendencies that are well established in queer scholarship, such as the erasure of bisexuality (e.g., San Filippo, 2013) or the emphasis on tragic, traumatic aspects of queer existence, e.g., the film *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), which had been assigned “Hate Crimes” but not “Romance,” “Friendship,” or anything else that might convey the richness of protagonist Brandon Teena’s life before his murder. Strange omissions also surfaced. For instance, *Mulholland Dr.* (2002) lacks any LGBT-related subject heading even though its entire plot swirls around a soured lesbian/bisexual romance; one would imagine the story’s LGBT content to be much more integral to the film and relevant to its potential searchers than “Traffic accident victims,” which apparently did warrant a subject heading.

An informal comparison of the WorldCat “Lesbians” list with several web compilations of “iconic” lesbian films as well as personal knowledge of LGBTQ cinema revealed evidence of fascinating—and at times perplexing—decisions by catalogers. Stephen Daldry’s *The Hours* (2002), in which three intertwined storylines each feature lesbian characters and/or female-female romance, has no lesbian-related subject heading but *does* have “Man-woman relationships” as a heading. Between the two WorldCat lists, several “Female friendship” films with explicit lesbian relationships but no corresponding subject heading stood out; notable among them are *Booksmart* (2019), *The Favourite* (2018), *My Summer of Love* (2004), *Foxfire* (1996), and *Entre Nous* (1983). Some films featured related, narrower subject headings, such as

“Lesbian teenagers,” e.g., *But I’m a Cheerleader* (1999), *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (1995), *Jack and Diane* (2012); “Lesbian couples,” e.g., *Imagine Me and You* (2005), *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001), *Tell it to the Bees* (2018); “Lesbian mothers,” *The Kids are All Right* (2010), *If These Walls Could Talk 2* (2000); and “Older lesbians,” e.g., *The Owls* (2010), *Cloudburst* (2011), *Dólares de arena* (2014). Others LCSH applied included “Lesbianism” (*Disobedience*, 2017) and “Homosexuality” (*I Can’t Think Straight*, 2008). Track-and-field drama *Personal Best* (1982) featured the subject heading “Lesbian couples,” even though the putative lesbian couple has split by the end and one of its constituents is dating a man. In many cases, titles assigned narrower headings lacked the generic “Lesbians” heading in accordance with cataloging guidelines that discourage the use of broader terms when narrower terms are applied. This practice raises the dubious question of how frequently a user searches with a term such as “Older lesbians.”

I wish to emphasize that none of this is to blame catalogers for making the decisions they do. Rather, my goal is to highlight the inevitable subjectivity and inconsistency of many of those decisions and the guidelines from which they proceed, as well as the shortcomings of a system that requires them. Because aboutness determinations rely on the attitudes, beliefs, and background knowledge of the people indexing items (Taylor, 2006), consistency is elusive and gaps in knowledge and/or reflections of cultural norms cannot be expunged completely. Additionally, catalogers rely on a range of information that includes publisher-supplied terms and published reviews—so in some ways, they are only the messenger. While both official and activist-developed guidelines are available and helpful, many minoritized communities are not themselves in consensus about terminology, nor is terminology that community members use internally necessarily that by which they wish others to refer to them. Moreover, to the extent that negative space, silence, and subtext have historically comprised major aspects of queer representation, resistance, and self-articulation, a model of subject description that depends chiefly on what is made manifest within a given text will inevitably fall short. Sexual identity subject headings cannot well convey valences of queerness other than romantic pairings, such as a camp aesthetic or the palpable subtext of a “lesbian interest” production such as *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001).

No full picture can be painted from our data or existing studies of how users encounter these or any other films’ subject headings; subject headings that appear in different institutions’ catalogs may be affected by discovery layers, local cataloging decisions, and other variables. However “correct” terms are made to be, moreover, the dataset reveals that no easy guideline exists (nor can it) for when to apply them. As such, the data provides invaluable insights into the impossibilities inherent in the project of cataloging. I hold, further, that these impossibilities are sometimes benign or even beneficent to queerness.

What to make of all the idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies apparent in our dataset? On one hand, it is patently degrading to euphemize same-gender romance as “friendship.” Per Hjørland (1998, p. 610), subject analysis is “a process of giving priority to those subjects which best serve the needs of the user of the information system in question.” It is difficult to believe that *Desert Hearts*—as opposed to a buddy film such as *Thelma and Louise* (1991) or *A League of Their Own* (1992)—is what somebody searching for “female friendship” would have in mind. In this regard, the co-application of the terms “Lesbian” and “Female friendship” is both demeaning and

impractical. On the other hand, discussions of critical cataloging tend to focus on users who share a particular intent: finding LGBTQ-related material. It is undeniably important for these users to be able to find that material. But is it not in a way desirable to consider the possibility of LGBTQ-related material *unmarked as such* falling into readers' hands as simply another romantic comedy or adventure story or postapocalyptic saga?

A focused and exhaustive content analysis could examine the different ways we might quantify (homo)sexuality, e.g., by duration of sex scenes or proportion of sexual material in relation to an entire film's duration, but those metrics quickly become absurd. At the same time, this absurdity returns us to the question of what queer content "is" and how we recognize it. Glenn Campbell (2000) offers perhaps the most in-depth discussion to date of aboutness in the context of sexual identity. Drawing from literary theory, he problematizes the notion that a cataloger can effectively distinguish a work's intrinsic content from its received meaning, that the so-called data of a text can be articulated outside of any interpretation of it (p. 124). "The more one looks for intrinsic content," Campbell writes, "the more one finds that even the most stable, formal features of a text are constructed and interpreted by individual readers within the context of specific discourse communities" (p. 126). In other words, a text's meaning can vary greatly depending on audience positionality; there is no universal reader—or cataloger.

Aiming for greater precision or additional subject headings means multiplying the number of assumptions we make about a text, the number of ways we "out" and crystallize its queer aspects into a predetermined category. Even if we use what we have determined to be community-preferred terms, we reinscribe the paradigm of outing over and over on increasingly granular levels, further ingraining the notion that a "yes" or "no" answer is possible when the question is whether a text warrants a subject heading related to sexual identity. The inheritance of confession remains, just as the foundation of marriage remains the exchange of women as capital between men even if in practice it is now more inclusive.

Perhaps most damagingly, as Sedgwick warns, the "mimeticism of paranoia circumscribes its potential as a medium of political or cultural struggle" (p. 131). Drabinski identifies this mimetic tendency in corrective cataloging, noting that the framing of a particular problem goes a long way, for better or worse, in determining approaches to its remediation (p. 105). In the context of cataloging, the framing of aboutness means that applying (or not) subject headings around sexuality is always a project of outing: is it or is it not "gay enough" to merit a subject heading? Surely we can pose better questions. This framework, after all, relies on the pernicious assumption that queerness is an identifiable and quantifiable thing to be found in texts, a knowledge that, given the right parameters, can be "had."

Paranoid Reading and the Paradigm of Exposure

Germane to questions of outing, representation and visibility have long been contested issues—arguably *the* issues—within lesbian theory and criticism. Annamarie Jagose (2002) questions the paradigm of (in)visibility and representation that often frames lesbian studies as a field. Amy Villarejo (2013) argues against the longstanding view that mainstream television eschewed LGBT characters all the way up until the 1980s. Through film, Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) critiques historical and ongoing biases that have kept Black lesbians invisible in traditional archives. Judith Butler (1993, p. 310) asks of sexual identity categories, "if a sexuality

is to be disclosed, what will be taken as the true determinant of its meaning: the phantasy structure, the act, the orifice, the gender, the anatomy?” We might pose parallel questions of aboutness in cataloging: if a sexual identity term is to be ascribed to a text, what will be taken as the true determinant: the narrative structure, sex acts, acts of disclosure, romantic relationships, self-identified characters whether sexually active within the text or not?

Finally, what does it mean to call a book or film “lesbian”? What makes a typical lesbian feature film, in which sex acts probably comprise 5% or less of the total running time, “lesbian” enough to meet aboutness criteria? Ostensibly, the effect of subject headings is on the user and on lesbians and not on the book or film itself—but providing keywords also guides the reader, in the same way that reading a book for a particular class guides the reader. If a film is assigned a subject heading such as “lesbians” or appears under Netflix’s LGBTQ category, the viewer will watch the film with different expectations (which may be fulfilled or disappointed) than if it were simply presented as a drama or comedy. The act of cataloging thus effectively “outs” a text in a way that its author typically has no control over. That’s not necessarily a bad thing, but naming agency in this and other areas must be treated as a process with serious ethical stakes.

Like Sedgwick, librarians have advocated against paranoid mindsets in the research process, albeit with a different conceptual vocabulary. Confirmation bias is one manifestation of such a mindset: performing a search in terms that all but ensure a specific, desired outcome. The ACRL Framework itself emphasizes the importance of particular practices and disciplines when conducting research. We librarians might do well to bear these in mind when approaching the catalog, too. Specifically, the frame “Research as Inquiry” encourages a humble, open-minded approach to research questions—as opposed, implicitly, to paranoid reading’s anticipatory nature and refusal of surprise: “Learners who are developing their information literate abilities . . . consider research as open-ended exploration and engagement with information [and] maintain an open mind and a critical stance” (2016). This guidance evokes Sedgwick’s critique of paranoid interpretive practices: “The first imperative of paranoia is there must be no bad surprises . . . [paranoia enacts] knowledge in the form of exposure” (2003, p. 130; 138). We often teach writing in paranoid terms: one develops a thesis—something one suspects about a text—and then goes about “proving” one’s suspicion by locating evidence that supports the thesis; our research is thus predisposed to finding what we already suspect to be true.

As Sedgwick puts it, “because there can be terrible surprises . . . there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters” (145). Indeed, what better way of serving the gay agenda, as it were, than by introducing unsuspecting users to texts that a representation-based system might have steered them away from? Rather than attempting to re-catalog every euphemistically tagged “female friendship” film, why not allow these impossibilities to inform our understanding of the provisionality and opacity of sexual identity, of queerness—to let a viewer’s heteronormative presumptions be uprooted when Cay first kisses Vivian through the car window in *Desert Hearts*? Why not allow for the possibility of increased representation via the *non*-demarcation of LGBTQ content? One can be present as a lesbian without being described as one, after all.

To this point, Butler writes that “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes,

whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression. This is not to say that I will not appear at political occasions under the sign of lesbian, but that I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies” (1993, p. 308). The notion of precise and/or community-preferred language must be reconciled with, or at least cannot take automatic precedence over, community-preferred approaches even when those approaches conflict with a cataloger’s goal. Some degree of imprecision is an ethical imperative in cataloging, or at the very least it is a way to resist the paradigm of exposure.

Inextricable Sciences

Arguments (e.g., Christensen, 2008) for correction to “community-preferred” terms as an alternative to scientific or medicalizing language celebrate the range and diversity of contemporary modes of gender expression and sexual orientation. Many of these terms are detailed beautifully in grassroots resources such as the Homosaurus. In “Taxonomically Queer?” Kadji Amin (2023) explores vernacular uses of taxonomy among contemporary queer and trans cultures. He calls this expansive, utopian model “combinatorial queerness”: discursive liberation is seemingly instantiated “through a multiplying menu of increasingly fine-grained identity options” (p. 92). However, given the political thrust of queerness as a “deconstructive method of troubling categorizations,” he writes, this recourse to taxonomy is a philosophical departure from the fundamental premises of queer theory and in line with the classificatory logics of the sexological and racial sciences that emerged in the early twentieth century (p. 92).

Bad terms in the catalog are not simply an accident of time fixable through today’s vision. The framework of taxonomy—the categorization of any sexual orientation or gender identity as one among many ontologically equivalent options rather than, say, as a compelling argument *against* such taxonomies—“contains these modes of being securely within the sexological system of compulsory gender and sexuality they might otherwise be deployed against” (p. 95). That is, taxonomic approaches hold that everyone in fact “has” a nameable gender and sexual orientation that can be articulated adequately and unproblematically through the right combination of terms. This approach clashes with queer theory’s insinuations reaching back to Butler, Sedgwick, and others that sexual identity categories enact a false revelatory promise and merely provide “access to a different region of opacity” (Butler, 1993, p. 309).

A noteworthy difference with the new taxonomies is their origin and self-appellation within queer cultures themselves rather than their conception and imposition by doctors, scientists, or religious leaders (Amin, p. 96). Amin cites intent as crucial: these queer taxonomies seek not to fix and hierarchize but to allow for innumerable permutations that constitute innumerable modes of personhood and relationality (p. 97). One might call oneself, as Amin does, a “trans fag” (p. 93), or more multifariously a genderfluid aromantic lesbian. But, as ever, context is key. One might want one’s friends or romantic partners to use those terms; one might or might not want the catalog or other official bodies to replicate them. Community members may use them ironically or with tacit acknowledgement of their insufficiency. Those dispositions both require individual contexts and local knowledge, which a catalog is ill-equipped to provide.

Yet the subtleties of identity aren’t the only thing for which cataloging can never fully account. Its access-focused functionality provides users no etiology. Though the catalog has adopted the

terms of sexology and their successors, a subject heading provides no information about how our contemporary conceptions of sexual identity emerged. Cataloging taxonomies cannot account for their own histories—that is, for the reasons the terms that make it into controlled vocabularies have persisted where others have fallen into disuse; for their unannounced racial, socioeconomic, and geographic underpinnings/contingencies; for the question of how the gender of one’s sexual partner(s) became the hinge point of sexual orientation rather than any other variable in sexual relations; and why what were once viewed as acts and desires crystallized into wholesale categories of human ontology.

Amin emphasizes the fact that no matter how to-the-moment they are, sexual identity categories—e.g., those listed in Facebook or dating apps or dropdown menus on medical providers’ websites—developed in tandem with race science in the early 1900s:

to be sexologically diagnosable in the first place was *a white distinction*—a testament to the individuality, complexity, and value of white bodies and psyches ... Indigenous and racialized peoples were not considered deviant as sexological individuals who might be homosexuals, sadists, sexual fetishists, etc., but rather en masse, as constitutively and polymorphously perverse populations (Ross 2005; Driskill 2016). As part of the greater current of white eugenics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sexual taxonomies offered a schema through which to expose and eliminate—biologically, ideologically, or otherwise—sexual deviance within the supposedly superior white race to help maintain its “purity” and dominance. (p. 96-97)

Sexuality is never just about sexuality. It is always also about gender, race, coloniality, class, ability, and the many other inflection points of what we perceive as social identity or positionality. Discussions of cataloging sexual identity should always account for these other factors, even while at some point we may bracket them for practical purposes, yet they often take place in relative isolation.

The catalog also reflects problematic hierarchies within queer identification. It is not quite right to say that *Brokeback Mountain* is about gay men, for instance, as both male leads are married to women, and neither character ever self-identifies as gay. But, anticipating that the film would be of interest to someone searching for “gay men,” the application of this LCSH makes sense. Two cataloging principles, precision and anticipated user need, are thus at odds, and in this case the resulting omission is one that participates in a cultural tendency far bigger than libraries to erase bisexuality and pansexuality. How many people within or outside of libraries refer to *Brokeback Mountain* or *Desert Hearts* as bisexual rather than gay or lesbian films? Taxonomies produce knowledge, but they also perpetuate existing discourses that transcend the catalog.

Incrementalism and Surveillance

Sedgwick (2003) writes that “paranoia is characterized by placing, in practice, an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se—knowledge in the form of exposure” (p. 138). The “faith in exposure” manifest in corrective cataloging works to extirpate offensive and dehumanizing terms. This is an effective harm-reduction tactic, but it might also be seen as a form of incrementalism that binds us ever more tightly to the problematic system rather than making structural changes to it. In *Knowledge Justice*, Anastasia Chiu et al. (2021) consider

political scientist Charles Lindblom's concept of incrementalism in the context of libraries, defining it as "the method of change by which many small policy changes are enacted over time in order to create a larger broad-based policy change" (51). They cite the amendment of the "illegal aliens" LCSH as an example of incremental change: a Herculean effort by activists that, while it reduces harm, ultimately effects little to no change at the level of process (65).

This politics of correction (Drabinski, 2013) is a form of incrementalism. Ultimately, incrementalist approaches coax even marginalized communities toward increased acceptance of and dependence upon hegemonic structures. Incrementalism characterizes the civil rights approach, for example: in seeking equality, minoritized groups have often fought to gain rights held by dominant groups, such as voting and marriage rights. While the legal ground these battles stake has important material effects, their framework ultimately shores up the patriarchal white supremacist institution that is the rule of law in American democracy. Marriage rights were desirable to many within the LGBTQ+ community because they would confer a sense of equality and as a channel for corollary benefits that they might otherwise be denied on the basis of their relationship's composition—inheritance rights, tax benefits, healthcare access, hospital visitation rights, to name a few. Meanwhile, queers leery of same-sex marriage view that campaign as binding us and the legal rights it accords more and more closely to the existing legal system when we might instead focus on universal healthcare, for example.

Linear progress narratives and incremental steps toward justice have been persuasively problematized by thinkers in queer theory as well as in critical race theory. The faith in fixing problem terms that Drabinski (2013) contests relies on precisely such a notion: if catalogers replace all "bad" terms with "good" ones, the catalog is fixable and potentially even an ally. Besides presuming that terms are either bad or good without reference to how they're applied, as in the case of "Female friendship," whose tenor varies situationally, this outlook presumes a monolith, presumes that the catalog and other hegemonic entities *should* be using the language community members use. It ignores the inevitable behindness of official vocabularies and the absence of consensus among LGBTQ individuals. To whom does the prerogative to determine when a term is obsolete belong? While determinations of guidelines for the most humane application of terms are made by many queer-identified members of the cataloging community, it is not through their voice that the user encounters these terms. It is through the depersonalized countenance of a library catalog. The lay user does not know that the cataloging community may intend sexual identity terms to be provisional and contingent; the catalog cannot teach someone queer theory. Even if the catalog is a project of constant change, it is a hegemonic mouthpiece and it presumes that even temporary universality is possible and desirable. It is an authoritative voice and thus implicitly prescriptive.

Beyond the intricacies of which terms to use in which contexts and with whom, the principle of discoverability itself still poses political conundrums. The risk intrinsic to the very project of discoverability is a particular issue for queer and/or gender-diverse individuals. How much precision is desirable with regard to subject headings around sexual identity? Legibility is also "a condition of manipulation" (Scott, 1999, p. 83), and "while increased access by way of added and corrected headings and classes might attenuate the violations inherent to these heteropatriarchal systems, it does not free subjects from them" (Adler, 2017, p. 149)—nor do increasingly granular subject terms. Addressing the same quandary, Michel Foucault (1978)

argues that the more nodes of identity we create, the harder it becomes to think of things (or, more to the point, people) in ways unattached to those terms. Increasingly granular identities become increasingly totalizing and reductive; once a predilection for a particular act or demographic or other vector of desire is named as a form of identity, it comes to be viewed as a core, essential part of that person's being rather than as simply an act or tendency. Any act of grouping together is also an act of flattening difference, however provisionally or strategically. This is true of all demographic groups, and their conflations manifest in many pathological ways—for example, the chronic reduction of “women's concerns” by white feminist groups that presume their concerns to be universal and gender to be undifferentiated by race, class, and ability. Intersectional approaches that consider multiple facets of identity are thus crucial—but as Butler (1993) warns, identity politics are intrinsically limited, and overinvestment in them can be dangerous.

While I feel no need for nominal affirmation from the catalog, the ability to discover queer-related materials is both crucial and fraught. We need to be able to find things, and we need to remain wary of the mechanisms that enable us to do so. Maximal representation would have catalogers squinting hard for queer content, erring on the side of overapplication. It would also make life easy for would-be censors to identify “objectionable” material for removal in swaths. Biased, closeted, or otherwise timid users might shy away from materials cataloged under LGBT subject headings, and discoverability also necessarily means surveillability—an increasing concern as schools and universities in a growing number of states face legislative constraints on curricula and collections. This is not to propose “closeting” resources as a strategy but simply to point out that something discoverable is equally so to the community that needs it and to its adversaries.

(Against) Conclusions

K. R. Roberto (2011) laments the absence of a subject heading for “queer”: “If there are no queers in LCSH, what does Queer theory study?” (p. 58). While “queer” is a preferred term for some, Roberto's formulation here, in crystallizing “queer” into a noun, clashes with the very foundations of queer theory and its critical eye to the cultural forces that shifted Western conceptions of sexuality from acts to ontology. And largely, I would argue, queer theory does not in fact study people as a primary concern. Rather, it studies the ways language, psychological drives, demographic factors, capitalism, and other political forces act upon, against, and with one another to produce specific effects. It studies what people do (and what is done to them, physically, legally, discursively, and otherwise), not who they are. In some ways, therefore, not having a subject heading for “queer”—*not* reifying a term whose community insists that it is dynamic and fluid and not even always related to sexual object choice—is the most respectful approach the Library of Congress could take. Where my view aligns with Roberto's is in their assertion that “no matter what the terminology says, queerness is still present in the catalog” (58). All evidence warrants skepticism of the catalog's humanizing potential, but the question might better become what we can do with or despite the catalog rather than what we should do to it.

To recapitulate, in the absence/presence paradigm of exposure, presence in cataloging is always only the presence *of a particular set of items that have emerged as thinkable*. In this sense, I argue, “accurate” cataloging functions as a means of “outing” texts—which both plays into the

insidious paradigm of closeting and also implicitly silences texts that might be queer in ways other than overt content (whatever “overt content” means). Catalog corrections commit workers to an ongoing process of renaming that will never unsettle the underlying notion that it is possible to adequately capture and describe queerness. What Sedgwick describes as “knowledge in the form of exposure”—of bad subject headings, of the catalog’s failings and complicities—is insufficient to make meaningful, sustainable change (p. 138). It also relies upon the notion that knowing the gender of someone’s sexual partners gives us access to some core truth about them rather than simply another area of opacity, and it limits visibility to a particular set of existing and highly political categories, preferred terms or not. I am largely ambivalent and see no cataloging solution that fully reduces harm. Letting subject terms rot uncorrected into obsolescence is impractical and can cause harm, yet seeking ever more precise and proliferating terms to iteratively replace them relies upon a reifying—perhaps even ontological—view of sexuality. In cataloging, it may be impossible to move fully away from the foundational question of whether or not the text is queer, but we can think more about the effects of asking and answering it.

Perhaps, after all, the queerest thing about the catalog is the fact that no Library of Congress Subject Heading for “queer” exists. Whatever the reason, this strikes me as an instructive instance wherein silence is a more ideologically sound approach than representation, especially given the politics of the community in question. Making sure resources with LGBTQ themes are all “properly” labeled and discoverable, ordered and controlled, is in one sense the most anti-queer, or at least unqueer, thing libraries could do. In the eyes of some, constant updates to the catalog align with the provisionality and fluidity of queer identification. I recognize and value the importance of organizing politically around a term, e.g., in a campaign for legal rights. But I do not find the greater specificity of ever more granular terms to be liberatory; to me, imprecision is a queer political imperative.

As Drabinski (2013) indicates, public services librarians have more opportunities to discuss the politics of metadata with library users than do technical services librarians: “A queerly informed teaching librarian has the potential to transform these moments [of encountering bias or idiosyncrasies in the catalog] into another point where the ruptures of classification and cataloging structures can be productively pulled apart to help users understand the bias of hegemonic schemes” (p. 107). It would benefit public services librarians such as myself to learn more about cataloging practices; it would benefit the faculty for whom we teach to develop a deeper understanding of information infrastructures; and it would benefit anyone trading in taxonomies to study some of the foundational texts in queer theory that have done so much to unsettle cultural notions of identity and essentialism in the contexts of sexuality, gender, race, and more. None of these parts can be isolated, nor can they be “fixed” from any one position.

This dilemma bespeaks endemic disconnects between academic libraries and their users. While classes on queer theory and the history of sexuality nearly always explore various taxonomies of identity, they typically do so in the context of the medical and social sciences that have promulgated them—not necessarily through the everyday information infrastructures that perpetuate them more quietly. The solution, insofar as one exists, is not to fix an unfixable system but to foster a deeper understanding of sexual identity and its complex histories among those who must use the system and a deeper wholesale understanding of the stakes of taxonomy

as an endeavor. This problem is much more one of disciplinarity, of advocacy, of the marginality of librarianship, and much less one of vocabulary.

Indeed, a solutionist mindset may itself be part of the problem. A universalizing solution will fail not only because it cannot attend to all the specificities and contingencies of sexual identity but because it is unwilling to brook surprise, to imagine the possibility that a flawed system's shortcomings can sometimes produce positive outcomes. Not only do patently biased subject headings readily expose the system's failings, but they also make manifest the limits of *any* system of categorization. Beyond that, they allow for slippages of meaning, for serendipity and imagination harking back to a pre-sexological time, which brings with it joy and humor and a kind of recuperation that the sisyphian work of correction cannot.

Desert Hearts ends inconclusively. Though the protagonists have seemingly accepted the nonviability of a continued relationship, as Vivian boards her train back to New York Cay jumps on board to accompany her “just to the next station.” It is a scene full of melancholy, hope, contradiction, and uncertainty, and as such I find it infinitely richer than any definitive ending—lesbian-affirming or otherwise—could have been. Sometimes it is through dissatisfaction and complication that we can make the deepest meaning. By the same token, discomfort and discontentment are generative emotions in the context of the catalog. Is it at times exasperating, hurtful, and disheartening to encounter devaluing terms or framings? Undoubtedly. But I prefer that the symptoms of a heteronormative society remain manifest, however uncomfortable they may be. I would rather stay cognizant, not to say paranoid, of the catalog than be lured into believing it “correct” or perceiving it as an ally when its entire being represents a project of precision that is anathematic to queerness as I experience it. The more “accurate” the catalog is in its lexicon, the more it uses the terminology that my friends and contemporaries use for themselves, I fear, the weaker my instinct to question it will become. That of all things must remain uncorrected.

Acknowledgements

This article would not exist without Emily Fidelman's assistance in pulling the data set from OCLC. I am also very grateful to Emily, Andrea Rupp, Jessie Oram, and Rebecca McCallum for many thought-provoking conversations around queerness and cataloging, and to Billey Albina for gracious and incisive commentary that proved immensely helpful in clarifying my arguments.

Author Information

Lynne Stahl is the Humanities & Interdisciplinary Studies Librarian at Wesleyan University. Her research interests span film, gender studies, and critical information studies.

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