LGBTQ Heritage and Collections – SSN Literature Review

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Although the development of queer practice at museums across the UK has grown exponentially in recent years – with new examples of LGBTQ+ exhibitions, tours, events, and programming continuing to emerge – this has been accompanied by increasing debate amongst practitioners and researchers around how to take this work forward. What constitutes ethical practice in this area? What opportunities and pitfalls are posed by queer collections and programming work and what strategies can be deployed to navigate these successfully? How can heritage bodies approach queer practice in ways that engage everyone, benefit LGBTQ lives and lend support to contemporary and ongoing struggles for LGBTQ equality?

This review of academic literature on LGBTQ heritage and museums explores key themes in writing primarily from the last two decades. It draws on publications from both the UK and, where appropriate, internationally. It pays attention to differences and inconsistencies in approach across the four nations of the UK and, indeed, within each region, recognising the importance of acknowledging and understanding these regional variances within the context of the wider academic discourse on LGBTQ+ practice.

Two broad and related areas emerge from the literature:

- The first explores the various approaches museums have taken when queering their collections and spaces, considering how they have engaged with LGBTQ+ history and identities.
- The second focuses on how these histories and narratives are presented and received within the public realm, contextualising practice within broader socio-political debates and reflecting on the contemporary implications of queer heritage practices for LGBTQ lives, for diverse heritage audiences and for society more broadly.

Within these two broad areas for discussion a number of themes have been identified (see below) which are analysed in greater detail throughout this literature review. Finally, gaps in knowledge are identified with recommendations for further research presented. It should be noted that the theme of 'Trans Voices' appears under both headings as the particular needs of this group in the current social and political climate demands a specific focus.

1. Interpreting LGBTQ+ History & Queering Museum Collections

Overcoming the Queer Language Barrier

For as long as museums have engaged with the subject of diverse sexuality and gender expression, so too have they ruminated over the 'correct' or 'appropriate' use of terminology to accurately describe these identities. Museum staff and academics have taken a number of different approaches in their use of language with a consensus on best practice continuing to stimulate debate. Some have argued in favour of ascribing contemporary identity markers to those individuals, both past and present, with variant gender identities and sexualities whilst others emphasise the futility in attempting to do so (*see* Levin 2020; Smith & Sandell 2018; Sandell 2017; Ferentinos 2015). Sandell highlights that the process of choosing terms for use in the museum can be "fraught with complications" (Sandell, 2017: xiii) whilst Ferentinos acknowledges that "the words used to describe variant gender expression and sexuality are by no means universally agreed upon" (Ferentinos, 2015: 5). As a result, museums can find themselves confronted with the daunting task of introducing oftentimes unfamiliar terminology to their spaces that may be acceptable to some but rejected by others. It is not surprising therefore that a divergence in thinking occurs with a variety of examples existing throughout the literature detailing how this complex issue has been addressed.

The much-used acronym LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) has been applied by some due to its familiarity in popular discourse (Ferentinos 2015; Vincent 2014). Ferentinos, for example, employs 'LGBT' in her earlier work, devoting an entire introduction to justify its use, but ultimately acknowledges that she is "not entirely at peace with [her] decision to apply this term… to the past" (Ferentinos, 2015: 5). Others have expanded the term to LGBTQ to incorporate 'queer'. For example, in their work on the National Trust's *Prejudice and Pride* programme, Smith and Sandell used both 'queer' and 'LGBTQ', adopting the latter "to denote [their] concern for the widest possible range of experiences whilst acknowledging that there is no single overarching history and that people's experiences will vary greatly" (Smith & Sandell, 2018: 38). Similarly, Levin employs LGBTQ but adds a '+' to denote those who fall outside of these more fixed titles. Like Smith and Sandell, she too acknowledges that "any attempt to include every group would lead to an unwieldy and still incomplete abbreviation" but chooses to include the '+' as a way of acknowledging the impossibility of completeness when referring to this group's identity (Levin, 2020: 13). Evidently, attempts to ascribe titles to all diverse gender identities and sexualities can inevitably result in a never-ending list

of acronyms or what Ferentinos describes as the "alphabet soup" approach (Ferentinos, 2015: 7). The use of identity markers (such as 'LGBTQ') are viewed by some heritage practitioners as helpful for linking histories of same sex love and gender diversity to familiar and well used contemporary identity categories. At the same time, those who do not identify with any of these titles, or feel they fall somewhere in-between are certainly not represented equally and ultimately, the assignment of fixed identities can prove more divisive.

A particular challenge facing museums in the selection of terminology lies in the attempt to ascribe contemporary terms such as 'L, G, B, or T' to historic figures who almost certainly would not have understood or identified with such definitions (Ferentinos 2019; Sandell 2017; Corber & Valocchi 2003). Some have presented the term 'same-sex love and desire' as a preference to more fixed titles to describe variant sexualities and as a broader category that "moves away from contemporary labels as well as the modern emphasis on sexual practice and self-identification" (Ferentinos, 2019: 171; *see also* Sandell 2017). By utilising this term, museums can acknowledge the divergent sexuality of individuals from the past without applying modern terminology or making assumptions on how they might have identified had they been alive today.

Another popular, though at times contested, choice presented as an 'umbrella' term for diverse sexuality and gender identity is 'queer'. This once derogatory slur has been adopted as a "fighting word, appropriated by those from the LGBTQ community as an integrating term" (Lakoff & Morrissey, 2008: 3). Matt Smith, in his work at the V&A offers a strong justification for its use when he explains that "there is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates a positionality vis-à-vis the normative – a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men" (Smith, 2020: 70). In this sense, 'queer' can refer to anything that challenges dominant perceptions of the norm, moving beyond sexuality and gender identity towards a broader interpretation of 'otherness'. By acknowledging the spectrum on which gender identity and sexuality exists, 'queer' allows for the inclusion of those individuals, both past and present, whose identities cannot be articulated through fixed labels. Furthermore, it allows museums to discuss historic individuals with variant gender identities and sexualities in a more inclusive way that does not favour one contemporary title over another. There are, of course, the negative connotations associated with it, particularly in the UK, where individuals will recall its use as a derogatory taunt (Smith and Sandell 2018; Ferentinos 2015). This sentiment is not lost in the museum where staff have noted their unease over its inclusion, asking questions such as "would I be judged, defined, assessed, even criticised for talking about or printing 'queer' in public?" (Lakoff & Morrissey, 2008: 3). Clare Barlow, curator of the 2017 Tate Modern exhibition, *Queer British Art,* justified their usage

of 'queer' through the words of British artist and film director Derek Jarman, who said it once frightened him but now "for me to use the word queer is a liberation" (Barlow, Tate Modern: 2017).

While there are a plethora of examples demonstrating the variety of ways in which museums have described diverse sexualities and gender identities, one consistency in approach has emerged; that is the clear articulation of terminology from the outset. Academics and museum staff have consistently devoted space to discuss language and justify its use in their work. Ferentinos suggests that "regardless of which words you ultimately use, defining your terms will assist visitors, particularly those who are new to this subject to engage with the interpretive content" (Ferentinos 2015: 163). As more museums engage with LGBTQ+ heritage and the public encounter displays more frequently, there may come a point when the articulation of terminology is no longer necessary, but at this moment in time it remains an important aspect of queer interpretation. Ultimately, while the debate behind the appropriate use of language is rooted in inclusivity, it is clear that no current terminology exists that will be accepted by everyone. As Sandell highlights in his own work – "Despite my efforts to adopt language that is inclusive, as far as this is possible, I am aware that preferences differ from context to context and not all readers will be entirely comfortable with the terms I use" (Sandell, 2017: xiv). What is clear, however, is that if museums communicate their choice in terminology from the beginning then visitors will be able to engage with the subject in an ethically informed way. Until such time as a universally accepted word enters the discourse, this is an appropriate course of action.

Queer Intersectionality

As museum engagement with LGBTQ+ identity continues to evolve and grow, so too have calls for a more nuanced approach to queer curatorship that better explores the diversity of queer lived experience. In particular is the need for greater understanding of how museums should seek to deconstruct the intersectional forms of oppression faced by minorities and how this can be influenced by their individual group memberships. Ferentinos highlights that "even within one category – gay, for instance – no uniform experience or agenda exists" (Ferentinos, 2015: 7). Instead, museums must consider the intersectionality of LGBTQ+ lives and avoid merely labelling a form of practice 'queer' without careful exploration of the multiple forces that lead to this group's oppression. Sandell highlights the potential for museums "to examine, more extensively, the ways in which sexual and gender diversity intersect with other forms of identity – including race, disability and class" (Sandell, 2017: 151). By doing so, museums will better equip themselves with the ability to deconstruct oppressive forces beyond the marginalisation of diverse genders and sexualities. Sverdljuk, for example, looks to intersectional feminism which "emphasizes the way in which subjects are situated in a complex discursive web of power relations conditioned by class, gender, ethnicity, and other axes of power" (Sverdljuk, 2020: 199). This concept of a 'web' captures the complexity of

injustice and the intersection of oppressive forces faced by minority groups. Similarly, when discussing the Van Abbemuseum's *Queering the Collection* project, the research team outline the theoretical text that acted as its foundation, emphasising the importance of queer and feminist theories - "An intersectional approach towards queer individualities is fundamental to acknowledge privilege and oppression within gay activism and beyond, and to be aware of social diversities and oppression" (Venir, 2015 *as cited in* Rensma et al 2020: 280). Therefore, it is clear that LGBTQ+ programming in the museum must be developed with an understanding of the intersectional nature of queer lives. In particular, this must seek to challenge the dominance of white, male, non-disabled, cisgender and middle/upper-class identities; by confronting their dominance in the museum discourse, the sector can work to introduce programming that better represents and advocates for a full spectrum of LGBTQ+ lives.

A number of academics have turned to queer theory to address the lack of intersectional LGBTQ+ representation in museum display. Levin, for example, argues that while museums may perceive the inclusion of LGBTQ+ programming as a contribution to their human rights advocacy, the representations of queer lives can still "remain grounded in (often false) essentialist binaries, such as male/female; transgender/cisgender; homosexual/heterosexual" (Levin, 2020: 7). Queer theory, however, can challenge this dualistic thinking "revealing the multiple ways in which it reinforces a privileged, white supremacist patriarchy" (Levin, 2020: 15). Examples of this can be seen in the museum sector such as the queering of the Van Abbemuseum in a way that did not solely rely on "events or exhibitions that feature LGBTQIA+ related topics, but to address deeper, structural questions about its own position with regard to gender and sexuality" (Rensma et al, 2020: 285). Similarly, Smith has been heavily influenced by the potential for queer theory "to explore and expose hierarchies and norms that privilege certain people and ways of being above others" (Smith [a], 2020: 70). By understanding these privileges, museums can seek to evaluate their own complicity in perpetuating these narratives before utilising their resources to undermine the oppressive power dynamics continually played out in the museum space. As Smith highlights - "What has been collected can influence whose histories can be told, and without representative objects, some groups may become silenced – often inadvertently – within museums" (Smith, 2020: 76). Queer theory offers museums a methodology through which they can address these silences and from this develop collections and interpretation policies that challenge institutional prejudice.

The development of a queer practice has been highlighted by a number of academics as a conduit through which oppression can be challenged beyond gender identity and sexuality. Rensma et al encourage a reflexive approach to museum practice, that engages "in critical self-reflection, examining questions such as why past interest in marginalized communities has been mostly

temporary, and what our institution can do to make this interest more consistent and integral"
(Rensma et al, 2020: 285). Within the context of LGBTQ+ programming, this form of practice seeks to
deconstruct not only the heteronormative forces present in the museum structure by queering
collections, but to move beyond gender and sexuality towards an intersectional approach to
queering the museum. This is an integral element of queer theory which focuses on challenging
dominant perceptions of not only gender and sexuality but the wider power relations that lead to
the oppression of multiple groups (Browne & Nash 2016; Holman Jones & Adams 2016). By engaging
with a queer practice that places this form of activism at its centre, museums have the capacity to
diversify the range of identities explored in both LGBTQ+ programming and the wider museum
discourse. This is not limited to the forms of oppression faced by this group, but the multitude of
ways in which they choose to exist. For example, Sandell discusses the intersection between queer
lives and people of faith, criticising media depictions of a battle between these two groups (Sandell,
2017: 154). Instead, he argues, that by demonstrating the intersectionality of queer and religious life,
museums "hold considerable potential to enrich public debate and understanding surrounding LGBT
equality" challenging a media discourse "that favours polarised arguments over complexity and
nuance" (Sandell, 2017: 154).

Ultimately, museums must consider the ways in which different identities can result in forms of
oppression that differ within queer communities. An understanding of the intersectionality of
injustice will allow museums to utilise their privileged position in a way that can promote meaningful
change for those most in need. The ongoing challenge remains; to be alert to the partial and limiting
character of LGBTQ history practice to date; to be creative and rigorous in exploring the fullest
breadth and diversity of queer lives in the past; and to find ways to connect rich queer histories to
the present in ways that resonate with contemporary lives.

Representations of Queer Women in Museum Display

A number of academics have highlighted the particular challenges faced by museums when
attempting to engage with the history of queer women (Ferentinos 2015; Levin 2010; Hein 2010;
Sandell 2017). Feminist theory has been cited in numerous museum texts for its interrogation of the
ways in which women are represented (Hein 2010; Clark Smith 2010). This work draws attention to
the dominance of male perspectives in museum interpretation, often displayed with greater
authority, while female lives have historically been presented only as subordinate to the male (Porter,
1995). Porter suggests that the role of women at the end of the twentieth century was subdued in
the museum setting as "passive, shallow, undeveloped, muted and closed" (Porter, 1995: 110) with
meaningful interpretation of women's history only recently coming to the fore.

Parallels between feminist and queer theory can be seen in the museum discourse which challenges the erasure of oppressed minority groups by highlighting the dominance of heteronormative and sexist narratives. Hein uses the example of heterosexual marriage and the "annihilation" of a woman's identity when she suggests that "for most people in Western society, Mary Jones ceased to exist upon her marriage: Mrs. John Smith took her place. This nomenclature was heteronormative, rendering invisible individuals in same-sex relationships" (Hein, 2010: 57). This erasure of female identity is rife in museum interpretation but particularly prevalent in the display of queer women whose stories have often been lost to "neglect or censorship situated in homophobia, heterosexism, and patriarchy" (Chenier, 2016: 179). Where men's lives have been recorded, documented and celebrated, women are consistently less prevalent in the archives. This lack of 'evidence' of queer women's lives has been exacerbated by the fact that same-sex activity between women was never formally criminalised in the UK, leading to what Petry describes as lesbians becoming "invisible to the dominant population except as objects of male lust" (Petry, 2010: 152). As such, museums must consider alternative routes to acknowledging queer lives that does not depend upon the burden of evidence (see 'Queering Museum Collections' section).

The exclusion of queer women from museum discourse has also been associated with a form of feminism that is not inherently inclusive. As Callihan and Feldman argue, the mainstream feminist movement "largely focused on a definition of woman that was white, middle class, cisgendered and able-bodied" (Callihan & Feldman, 2018: 180). Instead, they call for an intersectional approach to feminist museum work that seeks to include transgender and nonbinary identities as well as highlighting the ways in which gender discrimination is compounded by others forms of oppression (Callihan & Feldman, 2018: 180).

Deconstructing Heteronormativity/Homonormativity

It is widely accepted that museum displays are steeped in heteronormativity and depictions of fixed gender binaries (Vincent 2014; Sandell 2017; Levin 2020; Sullivan & Middleton 2020). This refers to the ingrained assumption that every individual or associated object encountered by visitors to the museum is heterosexual or cisgender unless evidence is presented to the contrary. Often an unconscious assumption rather than an intentional assertion of dominance, it perpetuates the idea that heterosexuality and binary gender identities are natural and right, and anything that does not fall into this category is considered 'other', less desirable or outright wrong (Corber & Valocchi, 2003: 4). This has resulted in a dearth of queer objects in UK museum collections which Smith attributes to "the effect of British Victorian heteronormative collectors acquiring objects from countries subject to British homophobic legislation [which] ensured that queer narratives and biographies were unlikely

to make it into the museum records" (Smith[b], 2020: 18). By failing to address the lack of queer objects in the museum and by neglecting to reinterpret existing collections, the sector has allowed this narrative to continue.

The deconstruction of heteronormativity seeks to counter the entrenched invisibility of queer lives in the museum space and to highlight the "simple power of providing a group of people with a past" (Ferentinos, 2015: 13). By researching and interpreting the queer connections to their spaces and objects, museums have the capacity to undermine the heteronormative narrative and create more meaningful experiences for all visitors. Mills suggests taking a direct approach in the interpretation of LGBTQ+ connected objects, arguing that "exhibitions explicitly acknowledging the existence of queer subjects in cultural and historical contexts other than our own may at least serve to highlight and counter the perpetuation of a transhistorical, transcultural heterosexuality" (Mills, 2008: 45). As Lennon highlights in her analysis of the National Trust's *Prejudice and Pride* programme, many early interpretations of LGBTQ+ lives were "covertly referenced…through uncomfortable, ambiguous or coded language" (Lennon, 2018: 12). Sandell acknowledges that some might find the overt reference to an individual's sexuality or gender identity uncomfortable in the context of an object or artwork but is adamant that failing to do so will perpetuate the absence of LGBTQ+ narratives (Sandell, 2017: 84). Of course, this is not to argue that an individual's queer identity should be the only element of their interpretation. As Adair suggests, museums should include the queer experience in a manner "that represents the totality of the individual's life experience, insofar as that is possible" (Adair, 2010: 268). Ultimately, however, it is argued that museums should strive to clearly articulate the sexuality and gender identity of queer objects and stories in their collections, to begin to address and undermine the dominance of heteronormative framings.

The perpetuation of heteronormativity is not limited to objects in museum collections or the individuals associated with them but also through wider visitor experience discourse. The museum setting has traditionally been considered a safe space for the queer visitor, in particular the untested assumption that there is a high proportion of queer staff employed in the sector (Mertens et al, 2008; Adair, 2010). However, even with the presence of queer staff in the museum gallery, academics suggest that this has done little to effect change in how LGBTQ+ visitors feel upon entering these heritage sites (Mertens et al, 2008). Visitor feedback reveals that, although queer individuals feel comfortable visiting heritage organisations, they do not believe they "create a sense of welcome for GLBTQ individuals or couples" (Heimlich & Koke, 2008: 101). An example of this can be seen in the lack of inclusive branding and advertising depicting diverse families which ultimately perpetuates the heteronormative narrative by appealing to the heterosexual family unit (Heimlich & Koke, 2008: 102). It is the micro aggressions that may not appear obvious in an ever-ingrained heteronormative world

that can make the queer visitor feel unwelcome or unseen. By deconstructing these heteronormative practices, museums have the potential to not only reinterpret their collections but to change the entire visitor experience in a way that is more inclusive and representative of the communities they serve. As Ferentinos argues, this practice can act as a form of "reparation to a group who has historically been slandered, ignored, and erased" (Ferentinos, 2019: 170).

What heteronormativity shows us is that museum interpretation usually privileges white, heterosexual, cisgender, male identities (Smith, 2020: 77). While recent years have seen the sector engage with LGBTQ+ identity more than ever before, there is a risk that the content being produced will not deviate far enough from the imposition of heteronormativity (*see also* 'Queer Intersectionality'). Known as homonormativity, this risks enforcing a heterosexual ideal on what a queer identity *should* look like. As Ferentinos argues, "if we unconsciously favour gay and lesbian stories – those that fall neatly into the binary – we run the risk of neglecting other stories also present in historical sources" (Ferentinos, 2019: 174). As such, the full potential of queer representation and advocacy is not being realised in this instance and museums need to ensure that any form of LGBTQ+ practice considers perspectives beyond the dominant narratives including within the queer community.

Queer Collections Development and the Queering of Existing Collections

Alongside the challenges of unearthing previously oppressed or silenced histories and selecting the terminology to most appropriately describe them, museums have been confronted with the challenge of how best to interpret and publicly present past queer lives. Mills has argued for a step away from a "rhetoric of outing" whereby museums focus not solely on the question of who was queer in history but rather seek to explore "*why* and *how* we find queers in history" (Mills, 2006: 261). While Sandell acknowledges that in some instances, the overt reference to an individual's sexuality in the museum can appear "awkward, tokenistic, unnecessary and reductive" he nevertheless argues that museums must "unpack the reasons why same-sex love and desire is far less likely to be openly acknowledged in museums and galleries than the heterosexual equivalent" (Sandell, 2017: 84). An often-repeated argument against the overt referencing of queer sexuality and gender identity in the museum is relevance – why and when is it necessary or important to reference sexual and gender identities when presenting, for example, displays of nineteenth century landscape paintings? However, the same claim is rarely made against heterosexual lives whose stories are instead "openly discussed on the institution's walls in the form of descriptive labels" (Petry, 2010: 154). Vanegas reiterates the heteronormative nature of museum display and argues that, although objects might not necessarily have a sexuality or gender identity, it is generally assumed that their

owners or users were heterosexual unless it has been clearly stated they are connected to queer lives (Vanegas, 2002: 99). As such, it is necessary for museums to clearly articulate the queerness of objects in their collection and avoid the use of "obfuscating language" that merely alludes to rather than identities LGBTQ+ connections (Adair, 2010: 274).

Some academics have argued against exclusively associating LGBTQ+ identity with sexual activity (Vanegas 2002). By doing so, museums risk ignoring the full spectrum of queer identity and limiting the ways in which queer lives and heritage might appear. Vanegas suggests there existed a belief amongst museum management that "because lesbians and gay men are defined by their sexuality, they can only be represented by objects relating to sex, an approach that denies other aspects of gay and lesbian culture" (Vanegas, 2002: 99). Mills, however, argues that "queer sexual connections still need to be understood historically and presented as such" suggesting that museums should not attempt to disguise explicit sexual activity (Mills, 2006: 259). As Sullivan and Middleton articulate, the use in museums of warning signs and other devices that name queer objects and identities as "potentially offensive, dangerous, not suitable for children… (re)inscribe them as such" (Sullivan & Middleton, 2020: 33). In this instance, museums must consider the ethical implications when making decisions relating to objects that might be deemed unsuitable for families for example. Sandell argues that the tendency in much queer heritage practice to present portrayals of gender and sexual diversity that are segregated (both spatially and temporally) from the mainstream visitor experience, in ways that assume LGBTQ narratives are only relevant or appropriate for (adult) LGBTQ audiences needs to be tackled through more integrated and inclusive approaches that engage all visitors.

The development of a queer museum practice is not confined to the collection of new objects but can instead be introduced through the reinterpretation of existing objects. Approaches to queer curatorship are not merely defined by the display of who was queer in history, but also (and perhaps more importantly) must include the reinterpretation of museum practice in a way that challenges and subverts the heteronormative status quo through new understandings of a collection (Mills 2006; Sandell 2017; Ferentinos 2019; Smith 2020). By queering the fixed narratives of the past it is possible to reinterpret individual and group histories in an entirely new context, allowing museums to "confront, work against, and potentially reshape these norms in progressive ways" (Sandell, 2017: 67). In doing so, museums can challenge "not only the limitations of linear, self-evident history" but also enhance the visitor experience by offering new forms of interpretation developed through a queer lens (Mills, 2006: 260). It is particularly important that this becomes an embedded practice in the museum rather than a temporary addition. Smith noted during his work at the V&A "a member of the Out in Art group commented that while they enjoyed the tour, they were disappointed that the LGBTQ+ narratives had not made it onto the interpretation labels and instead needed to be

overlaid, either through tours or information sheets" (Smith[a], 2020: 73). By introducing these narratives to the general visitor offer, museums have the capacity to not only reinterpret their existing collections in a meaningful way, but as Sandell highlights, to integrate LGBTQ+ human rights narratives into the mainstream museum experience (Sandell, 2017: 156).

A recurring issue facing museum staff and academics during the development of queer programming is the demand for evidence, for incontestable proof of same sex love/desire or gender diversity. As previously discussed, LGBTQ+ lives in the past are much more difficult to define and as such the survival of written documents detailing same-sex encounters or gender non-conformity are unlikely to survive. Furthermore, the detailed description of sexual activity between opposite-sex partners is not expected in the same manner but is, instead, assumed. As such, museums must be prepared to contextualise queer stories in a way that allows their stories to be told without the burden of evidence (Sandell, 2017: 56). Vanegas argues that "the very fact that we do *not* know everything we wish we knew invites the visitor to interact with the past as opposed to merely consuming a historical product" (Ferentinos, 2019: 177). By presenting the information available alongside a contextualisation of the individual and the period, visitors are able to come to their own conclusions, allowing for a more rich form of engagement with the past. This practice of 'queering the museum' encourages museums and their visitors to "look at our collections with a fresh eye and explore further the multitude of possible perspectives and readings" (Horn, 2010: 3). Instead of focusing on documentary evidence, museums can present their interpretations through the lens of gender and sexuality in a playful way that challenges perspectives. Winchester describes this when discussing Matt Smith's *Queering the Museum* at Birmingham Museums as "a deliberate act of wilful confusion and disorder, a rummaging through the museum dress up box to see just what we might be missing" (Winchester, 2010: 9).

Trans Voices

The UK museum sector has evidently seen a growth in LGBTQ+ practice in recent years with development of impactful programming that has the capacity to positively affect queer lives. As we enter the second decade of this century however, it has become clear that LGBTQ+ human rights work in museums must consider the growing social and political oppression faced by transgender people specifically.

A number of academics have highlighted the prioritisation of homonormative and cisgender narratives in museum displays that fail to include the diversity of transgender lives (*see also* 'heteronormativity/homonormativity' section). In his chapter *Museums and the Transgender Tipping*

Point, Sandell notes an increase in trans-visibility since he first began researching the subject in 2005 but acknowledges that dedicated museum engagement with transgender narratives still remains uncommon (Sandell, 2017: 111). This is supported by Sneeuwloper et all, who argue that it has only been since 2015 "that institutions have presented a broader panoply of exhibitions related to the lives of trans individuals…As a result, members of transgender communities continue to express anger and frustration, seeking further representation" (Sneeuwloper et al, 2020: 265). What these points highlight is the need for dedicated transgender interpretation in museum practice. While this group is often included under the ubiquitous 'LGBTQ+' or 'queer', detailed examinations of their specific needs and how the museum might engage with them are limited. As Levin argues, "history is even more stubbornly silent about the lives of lesbians and transgender individuals in museum work than it is about the existence of gay men and bisexuals" (Levin, 2010: 3).

Sandell makes the case for progressive representations of trans lives, "told *from the perspectives* and *through the voices* of transgender people, as well as being shaped out of an understanding of human rights issues affecting the community, past and present" (Sandell, 2017: 111). It is his assertion that the participatory action of transgender people in museums highlights the sector's ability to challenge mainstream offensive caricatures of transgender people and instead portray transgender lives in a way that has been created from their own lived experience (Sandell, 2017: 124). This is in contrast to early displays of transgender people in ways that subjugated their existence within the wider discourse on sexual identity without creating appropriate space to discuss variance in gender identity. In his critique of the *Queer is Here* temporary exhibition at the Museum of London, Mills suggests that "transgender mainly comes into view as a subcategory of sexual identity rather than as a mode of identity that is experientially prior" (Mills, 2010: 82). It is his assertion that the failure to consider the nuances of transgender experience meant the exhibition did not consider trans perspectives. Similarly, Sneeuwloper et al suggest that early representations of trans lives tended to focus exclusively on their transition which can medicalise public perceptions of trans people and detract from their human experience (Sneeuwloper et al, 2020: 267).

Sandell's methodology places the position of trans people at the centre of his research whereby he argues that museums must appreciate the value of their perspective and expertise (Sandell, 2017: 115). The participatory nature of this practice is important "not only for ethical reasons but also because of the strategic advantage that raw, authentic and affective accounts of real life can bring to rights activism" (Sandell, 2017: 130). This is supported by Sneeuwloper et al who suggest that past transgender exhibitions have been too specialist in nature making it difficult to collaborate with the community and reinforcing "the authority of the curator rather than the experiential knowledge of the individual" (Sneeuwloper et al, 2020: 267). Instead, museums should seek to develop a practice

that engages transgender perspectives from the outset and provide dedicated displays that celebrate the existence of transgender people "in all aspects of life" (Sneeuwloper, 2020: 267). In their development of the *Mimi's Family* exhibition at Boston Children's Museum in 2015, Middleton and Greene took a similar approach by ensuring all interpretation was reviewed by an external advisory team that included LGBTQ organisations with many of the advisers being transgender themselves (Middleton and Greene, 2018: 222). While the discourse on transgender advocacy in the museum is in its relevant infancy, it is clear that museums must include specific interpretation relating to transgender lives rather than losing this identity under the 'queer' umbrella. In particular, museums must seek to develop a practice that is driven by transgender people themselves, placing their lived experience at the heart of any museum display of their identity.

2. Queer heritage in the public realm

UK Regional Particulars

The absence of queer practice at UK museums and the subsequent increase in programming seen in recent years has evidently received attention from a number of key scholars (Vanegas 2002; Mills 2006; Sandell 2017). These studies offer clear theoretical frameworks from which to remedy the absence of LGBTQ+ identity in the museum sector using supporting case-studies from across the UK. However, there has yet to be an appreciation of the regional variances that may impact upon museum engagement with LGBTQ+ identity, with the UK generally presented as a whole. The experience of a museum in Liverpool will be different to that of one in Aberdeen and different again to one in Derry with each location influenced by its own social, economic and political conditions. These differences must be considered by museums when engaging with oppressed minority groups if attempts to tackle issues of social injustice are to be made. Duggan argues that oppression must be considered within the context of specific locales, as the injustice faced by a marginalised group in one society may not be the reason for its existence in another, "despite the fact that other similarities exist between such societies" (2012: 19). Queer people living across the UK will encounter oppressive forces that may differ based upon their regional locale; whether that be an urban/rural variance or indeed a socio-political climate influenced by the devolved administrations of the UK. Therefore, museums must consider the development of queer programming within the

context of their geography and pursue a practice that seeks to challenge the specific forms of injustice faced by their LGBTQ+ populations.

As Sandell has noted, museums "have moral agency as sites within which the ethical norms that frame human rights negotiations are articulated, continually recast and disseminated" (Sandell, 2017: 7). It is this potential to provoke change at their sites that acts as motivation for understanding the regional variances within the UK. For example, academics have highlighted the importance of the UK Equality Act (2010) in advancing the rights of LGBTQ+ people and the impetus it places on museums to develop queer programming (Vincent 2014; Sandell 2017; Smith 2020). However, what is rarely articulated is that this piece of legislation does not apply to Northern Ireland, with a collection of less rigorous acts in place in the region. As such, museums must seek to understand the equality legislation specific to their locale in order to most effectively develop ethical guidelines that drive an informed queer practice. To date, there has been limited discussion of these differences with few academics exploring in greater depth the particulars of all four UK regions (and smaller regions within) as well as the urban/rural divide. The disparity in social and political attitudes to LGBTQ+ rights is felt across the UK but also in museum structures. With the devolved governments of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland able to influence to different degrees the work of museums, further research is needed into the specific impact of this on LGBTQ+ practice.

LGBTQ+ Rights Advocacy/Activism

By the end of the twentieth century, Western museum policy, within the context of a changing political and social climate, was shifting towards one of inclusion, with curatorial teams looking to their collections to understand how they could better engage with the communities they served (Vanegas 2002; Dodd & Sandell 2001; Kaplan 2006; Crooke 2006; Smith 2006). Perceived as an authoritative knowledge-provider, museum leadership believed the museum's position in society could play a significant role in combating prejudice through the engagement and representation of oppressed minority groups (Sandell 2006; Dodd & Sandell 2001; Pal 2001). This institutional change in traditional museum practice encouraged decision-making to be influenced by the community and transferred authority to those who had until that point been underrepresented.

Museums were no longer concerned with solely displaying a heritage dictated by the dominant group, instead they were re-evaluating their core purpose to respond to the needs of their diverse visitors and considering ways of making their spaces more relevant to underrepresented sections of society (Crooke 2006, Pal 2001). Whilst this practice remains central to most museum causes today, the sector continues to reflect on its relevancy in a modern world. Janes advocates a reflexive approach to museum programming, which considers how museums, as "deeply trusted,

knowledge-based, social institutions in civil society," approach public engagement in a way that responds effectively to contemporary issues of injustice (2015: 4). While much of his work calls for action against the threat of climate change, his theories are applicable within the context of social inclusion and oppression, arguing that "what the world really needs are museums that provide cultural frameworks to identify and challenge the myths and misperceptions that threaten all of us" (Janes 2015: 4)

An awareness of the museum's ability to challenge social and political injustice is not a new concept in museum theory; Sandell noted at the beginning of the 21st century that museology had moved "from the more abstract, theorised and equivocal to become more concretised and more closely linked to contemporary social policy and the combating of specific forms of disadvantage" (Sandell 2002: 3). The application of this theory in practice, however, has not materialised in the form of a standard institutional ideology centred around activism. As Wood and Cole have noted "there are very few 'mainstream' museums that take on social change in this way" suggesting that a notable shift in the sector is yet to come (Wood and Cole: 2019). Similarly, Sandell states emphatically in his more recent work that "museums, heritage sites and galleries are entangled with human rights in ways that are often unacknowledged and poorly understood" (Sandell, 2017: 6). Evidence of this can be seen in the lack of museum engagement with equality legislation that impacts their work. For example, few museums have considered queering their collections "in line with the 2010 UK Equality Act, which places a duty on organizations… to 'advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not' (V&A 2014)" (Smith, 2020: 77).

While most museums have certainly used their collections and spaces for community engagement in the past two decades, there is an important distinction to be made between merely *representing* a group and actually *advocating* for them. Being 'inclusive' or 'diversifying a collection' does not necessarily mean an organisation is tackling contemporary issues of injustice. By not articulating a position on LGBTQ+ and other human rights issues, museums have demonstrated a commitment to silence rather than action. This has been attributed in part to the "widely held belief among museum boards and staff that they must protect their neutrality…lest they fall prey to bias, trendiness, and special interest groups" (Janes 2015: 3). This is entrenched further by the Museum Association's recommendation in their code of ethics that museums should "take steps to minimise or balance bias" (MA, 2015: 11). Janes argues that an aversion to bias in the form of neutrality "is not a foundational principle of museum practice, but rather a result of the museum's privileged position in society" (2015: 3; *See also* Sandell 2002; Janes and Conaty 2005; Janes 2016; Janes and Sandell 2019). The failure to take an ethically informed position on issues of injustice, means the museum is

exercising a form of privilege denied to the very groups it purports to represent, one which willingly ignores the prevalence of prejudice in contemporary society.

Despite a history of neutrality, the sector is increasingly witnessing a shift towards a homogenous ethical position defined by activism, with more museums recognising their responsibility to affect change in an unjust society. In *Museum Activism* (2019), Janes and Sandell state emphatically that before a notable change in museum practice can materialise, "various internal challenges and habits of mind need to be addressed that continue to impede or diminish the museum as a key intellectual and civic resource" (2019: 7) while Graham Black has argued that "underpinning these issues is the need for a transformation in museum culture" (Black 2010: 130). In doing so, the museum's position as an institution committed to 'individual and societal well-being' will become, "not a distraction, but rather an inherent part of the museum's social role" (Vlachou 2019: 49).

By contextualising their collections and spaces within contemporary LGBTQ+ rights debates and eschewing their neutrality, museums have the potential to become platforms for the advocacy of queer lives. Sandell argues that museums should be more open to and comfortable with adopting the role of arbiter when it comes to contested human rights:

> "it is no longer appropriate… for museums to operate as impartial observers or spaces for dialogue in which alternative viewpoints are respected, aired and debated… they must be prepared to take sides and speak out unequivocally against attempts to justify unequal treatment of people on the basis of gender or sexual differences" (Sandell, 2017: 7).

This subject has received increased attention from academics in recent years who recognise the potential for museums to queer their collections and spaces in a way that challenges contemporary forms of injustice (Sandell 2017; Ferentinos 2019; Curran 2020; Smith 2020). One approach argues that museums must work to deconstruct the "progressive narrative" (Ferentinos, 2019: 176) whereby "the idea that the history of sexuality can be understood simply as a progression from repression to liberation potentially has limits as a tool of analysis" (Mills, 2008: 43). In the first decade of the twenty-first century, museum programming geared towards queer perspectives was centred specifically on LGBT identities, with examples of exhibitions exploring their rights and political struggles through a narrative of linear progress (Mills, 2008: 43). This came to define the focus of museum exhibitions on queer heritage in this period as an exploration of their role in society as an oppressed group and their journey towards equal rights under the law through an evolution of social attitudes. This is demonstrative of what Smith describes as a laudable attempt to "assimilate [excluded communities] into the fold rather than challenge underlying preconceptions" (Smith, 2006: 37). The suggestion that LGBTQ+ rights and social attitudes towards queer people have progressed

positively throughout history fails to consider the nuances of this group's lived experience as well as the intersectionality of queer lives. Furthermore, this approach can undermine the combating of contemporary cases of injustice faced by LGBTQ+ people which must remain central to a museum practice rooted in activism.

Organisational resilience and values

An aversion to risk and controversy can act as an impediment to the development of queer programming in UK museums. The introduction of a queer heritage practice can encounter a level of scrutiny not imposed upon other forms of museum practice with resistance from opponents to LGBTQ+ rights as well as museum staff and indeed queer people themselves (Mills 2008; Ferentinos 2015; Sandell 2017). Mills, writing in 2008, argued that the risks associated with queer programming "can be high, not least when public funding is at stake" (Mills, 2008: 42). More recently, Sandell has noted instances where the "museum's perceived support for LGBT equality is explicitly challenged by groups who view same-sex desire and gender diversity as immoral and deviant" (Sandell, 2017: 143). This is indicative of what Dubin describes as the emergence of 'culture wars' in the heritage sector that result in "impassioned confrontations between groups within society, polarized over so-called hot button issues" (Dubin, 2006: 477). With the dawn of increased advocacy for human rights in the museum gallery, so too has the opposition to changes in the status quo; most notably the reaction to the alteration of a perceived and carefully curated cultural and national identity (Dubin 2006; Smith 2006). Where one group can feel empowered by increased inclusivity in museum programming, another can feel threatened as the reallocation of power erodes the domination once held by governing groups (Dubin, 2006: 478). This is also supported by Lennon, who highlights the discomfort some groups can feel when they encounter challenges to perceived "immutable truths" that are ingrained in institutional heteronormative ideology (Lennon, 2018: 12).

Kaplan suggests that in the twenty-first century controversy in the heritage sector should be considered an inevitability, particularly with the "fracturing of national identities and contention within nations" (Kaplan, 2006: 167). As such, museums should be prepared for the potential controversy associated with LGBTQ+ programming. Ferentinos argues in favour of building "donor, board and staff support early in the planning process, rather than face unpleasant surprises later on" (Ferentinos, 2019: 178). By doing so, museums can ensure that any subsequent LGBTQ+ programming is protected, offering a stronger position from which to stand by their practice should controversy arise. Maguire suggests that the emergence of negative feedback should not result in the immediate halting of programming (Maguire 2016). Instead, he argues, museums should acknowledge the potential for controversy at an early stage and develop spaces where conflict can be expressed in a constructive way (Maguire, 2016: 79). While 'conflict' can certainly be expressed

and discussed in the museum, Sandell argues that there needs to be refinement of the idea of the "museum as forum" whereby the responsibility for confronting and digesting human rights issues is shifted from the visitor to the museum (Sandell, 2017: 148). In order to do this, he argues, museums must embrace bias and eschew their neutrality by articulating "within their mission statements, policies and practices, an explicit concern to address wide-ranging injustices" (Sandell, 2017: 147). This is supported by Vlachou who expresses concern over the 'safe space' narrative perpetuated by some museums which compounds the idea that they "should not risk making some people feel threatened by articulating viewpoints" (Vlachou, 2019: 53). It is her assertion, that "in order to become agents of change, museums must reaffirm their mission and principles rather than compromise them in a futile attempt to provide safe or comfortable spaces for all" (Vlachou, 2019: 53).

The perceived inevitability of negative feedback and potential controversy should not stand in the way of human rights advocacy in the museum. Provided museums prepare for a range of potential feedbacks whilst standing firmly by their programming, they can defend a well-researched, ethically informed practice with limited risk (Ferentinos, 2015: 165). Irrespective of this, it is important that museums stand firm in the face of intolerance and support their staff and colleagues in the development of LGBTQ+ practice. As Alistair Brown, Policy Officer for the Museums Association stated in response to the growing backlash against the National Trust's *Prejudice and Pride* programme -

> No museum should be dragged through the mud for conducting research that increases knowledge of an important subject. It's vital, therefore, that we speak up in support of the Prejudice and Pride programme, and against the cheap criticisms levelled by its detractors (Brown, 2017).

Trans Voices

The discourse on transgender identity has been volatile in UK media in recent years, with negative attitudes towards this group compounded by high-profile campaigns against trans rights (Sandell, 2017: 117). The level of transphobic bigotry that permeates media discourse today has been compared to the historic ways in which the "cis-queer community generally was perceived as other" (Petry, 2020: 255). As Petry highlights, many "in the mainstream found it difficult to imagine what a transgender, gender fluid, or intersex person looked like apart from cartoon representations, as was once the case for gays and lesbians" (Petry, 2020: 255). Sandell makes it clear that museums, through advocacy work, "will not, in themselves, bring about new legislation protecting people's rights, nor will they bring about a wholesale transformation in public opinion and attitudes" (Sandell, 2017:

130). However, it is his assertion that museums do have the capacity "to work against the toxic caricatures that have tended to dominate the mediascape" (Sandell, 2017: 131). As such, museums are in a position to counter the damaging depiction of transgender people and ultimately challenge the forces that lead to their oppression.

While formal legislation designed to protect trans rights has grown in the UK, public understanding and social attitudes towards transgender people has not developed in the same way (Sandell, 2017: 117). Similarly, while an increase in specialist transgender exhibitions and programmes has been seen in the museum sector, this "does not mean that prejudice, ignorance, and denial have dissipated" (Sneeuwloper et al, 2020: 267). Despite this, Sandell argues that museums are especially suited to advocate for trans lives as they "offer opportunities for forging and circulating new, affective articulations of transgender identity that are rarely seen in the public realm and which work against the negative portrayals that predominate" (Sandell, 2017: 118). The depiction of transgender lives in a nuanced, collaborative and reflexive manner can offer perspectives on this group's identity that challenge the popular discourse being fuelled by anti-trans bigotry in the British media.

The decision-making process behind the inclusion of transgender identities in the museum can be negatively influenced by the depictions of this group in popular media. Ferentinos, for example, highlights the discomfort museum boards might feel about introducing transgender programming, even by those who purport to support LGBTQ+ rights (Ferentinos, 2015: 152). While museums and their staff may consider themselves queer allies and advocates for LGBTQ+ rights, it is clear that in some instances, the 'T' is often forgotten. This is supported by Mills, who highlights the "marginalization of transgender as an interpretive lens" with museums failing to acknowledge the existence of trans lives and instead branding exhibitions as 'queer' which do not include this group (Mills, 2010: 82). As Mills highlights "activists within the trans community are more aware than most of the fact that the T in 'LGBT' is often a fake T" (Mills, 2010: 82). To counter this, Middleton and Greene argue that a "self-reflexive practice is essential for supporting transgender visitors and their families. Museum educators must educate themselves about gender identity and confront their own attitudes and biases" (Middleton and Greene, 2018: 224). By doing so, museums will be better equipped to challenge and undermine the transphobic discourse so prevalent in the UK today.

The literature on transgender representation in museum collections is particularly scarce within the context of LGBTQ+ discourse. This is reflective of the ongoing erasure of this group within cultural institutions and across the wider mediascape. As such, museums must take a firm position in support of this group, not only seeking to increase their representation but to actively advocate for their right to exist.

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