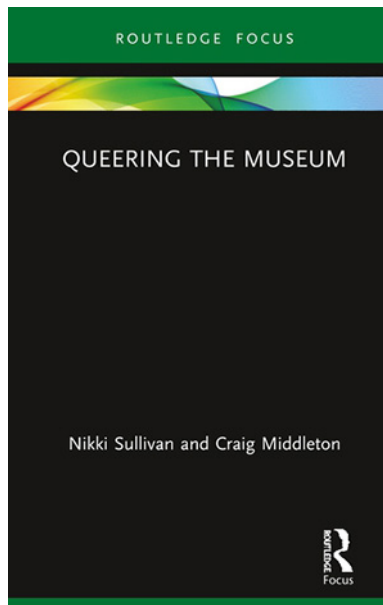


IRIDESCENT FUTURES

Imagining Alternatives with *Queering the Museum*

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Nikki Sullivan and Craig Middleton. 2019. *Queering the Museum*. London: Routledge, 122 pages.

“Radically different ways of knowing and doing are unlikely to occur to us, or, if they do, to feel ‘wrong’, ‘unprofessional’, or too risky” (Sullivan and Middleton, 26).

As I’m preparing for a day of museum meetings, I wonder if my young femme-domme-gender-queer-of-color aesthetics leaking through my fishnets, tattoos, and leather choker reveal “too much” about the queer I am - whether or not I’m appropriate or belong in this space. This began when I moved up in positions. I was hired initially as a contract laborer in the education department in an off-site after-school art program, moved

into temporary curatorial and installation, then temporary collections management, back to temporary curatorial and installation, and finally landed a full-time, then thought, permanent position in education as the teacher and student program coordinator at the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago. Unapologetically queer throughout all those cycles of uncertain employment within the same institution driven on the concept of “*la familia*” (or the family), I remained hopeful that I could contribute to queering this institution. I insisted, but quickly realized that the lure of a “stable” position was actually not going to consider my holistic well-being even though “we are familia” and I would have to perform labor for whatever stakeholders in addition to the work I saw as necessary. Madeleine Schwartz describes “Work is not, as the internship setting would suggest, an exchange of gifts. Work is an exchange of time for money.” (Schwartz, 2013). I would not get compensated for that “extra” work, but they would most definitely show it off and lay me off; I was just another disposable queer artist, curator, temporary contractor of color.

My temporary positions lasted longer than my “permanent” position did. It would eventually be terminated during the COVID-19 pandemic because teacher and student programs were considered “not essential” to the museum. As many museum education staffs would be annihilated

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across the United States, I wondered about the multiple queer approaches the museum could have taken to not remove people's livelihoods and health insurance during a global pandemic. What would it have meant if programming funds were reallocated? If off-site arts education was reimagined? Or if the president and the directors' salaries were redistributed more equitably? How could this moment benefit from queer methodologies like that of Amy Levin's call for "us to question every aspect of the institution" (Sullivan and Middleton, 30) versus the predictable colonialist approach it eventually took?

In Nikki Sullivan's and Craig Middleton's *Queering the Museum*, we witness alternative offerings that question, deconstruct, and reimagine what museums can be doing. They critique the institution of museums by exploring queer methodologies within and outside of the museum and addressing this institution as much as an entity as an action. Delving into critical race theory, indigenous studies, queer studies, feminist methodologies, cultural studies, the authors position museums as being shaped by the world around them, aspiring for inclusion yet continuing to hide and exclude the other-ed, and needing to advocate for museums' participation in critical reflections and approaches to this work. While this book can serve as a helpful toolkit for pushing, reimagining, and queering museums, Sullivan and Middleton resist the notion that there is a prescribed remedy or formula to queering the museum. And rather, "the queering of museums is, as we understand it, a process without end, and, perhaps more importantly, without a definitive goal (for example, social inclusion) that is presumed to be universally beneficial and achievable by following a particular path" (5). Both begin by acknowledging their positionalities in the work, Nikki Sullivan as a curator at the Migration Museum, coming from Gender and Cultural Studies, and Craig Middleton as the manager and curator at the Centre for Democracy in Adelaide, South Australia, coming from Museum Studies and Art History. They

both approach this text from small institutions where they navigated working across departments, not simply isolated in curatorial. Illustrating their experiences as queer practitioners in the field, they focus on three major areas of queer methodologies in museums: display and exhibition practices, cataloguing and collections management, and education and community engagement.

Beginning with the construct of heteronormativity, "Chapter 1: From LGBTIQ+ Inclusion to Queer Ethics" addresses its maintenance in museums that so easily becomes what Lisa Duggan calls "homonormativity" via basic assimilationist tactics including supposed gay inclusion in museums. They offer the brilliant example of "London's Natural History Museum's decision to open *Sexual Nature*, a temporary exhibition about sex in the so-called natural world, 'just in time for Valentine's Day' (Millard, 2011), thereby reinforcing the association of sex with love..." (29). They could have taken an alternative, queer, anti-capitalist approach to that day and address issues of domestic and sexual violence affecting communities and deconstruct the notion that violence is natural. Instead, they opted to cater to hetero/homo-normativity.

Even if it's not as explicit as saying "gay is bad" or "sex equals love," these insidious museum practices literally work as what S. Nikki Ahmed calls a "straightening device" (92) and perpetuate white, rich heteronormativity. Sullivan and Middleton state, "While monogamous, middle-class, respectable, primarily white, cisgendered, able-bodied, gay and lesbian couples, and even monogamous same-sex animal couples, may be appearing in museums, polyamory, kink, gender queerness, communal living, sex work, intergenerational relations, queer bodies, lives, and relations remain conspicuous in their absence" (29). This illustrates clearly why the politics of LGBTIQ+ inclusion can be unproductive to queering the museum, there remains a perpetuation of colonial hierarchies,

especially in an institution that still benefits from and is founded on such structures. Sullivan and Middleton continue on to introduce Joshua Adair's engagement with Elisa Giaccardi's notion of iridescence in museum work by questioning the ownership of knowledge and factual, single truths (31). Iridescence is queer possibility, offering infinite approaches and interpretations to an object or story without creating a hierarchy of one truth being more valid than another. Instead it embraces the vastness of difference and ongoing process of seeing, questioning, and knowing. This shift from inclusion to queer ethics and movement toward vastness and expansiveness takes us deeper into queering display and exhibition practices in the following chapter.

In "Chapter 2: Queer/ing Display," Sullivan and Middleton offer inspiration and examples of queering exhibition practices. They draw critiques of inclusion and exclusion from examples such as Fred Wilson's "Truth Trophy" installation in *Mining the Museum* and Ashkan Sepahvand's "Welcome Address" in *Odarodle: an imaginary their_story of naturepeoples, 1535–2017*, both addressing the silences and erasures of racist histories while creating what Sara Ahmed calls "disorientation" or productive discomfort and institutional critique on inclusion. A normative practice for LGBTQI+ inclusion in exhibitions is by way of objects, however what would it mean to highlight the lack of access to such objects because of hetero white supremacy?

Sullivan and Middleton offer their *Queering the Museum* exhibition inspired by Jo Darbyshire's *The Gay Museum* in the Western Australia Museum and Matt Smith's *Queering the Museum* at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in the UK. They highlight Darbyshire's queer approach to objects by reimagining insignificant objects to narrate a story in the exhibition. "Rather than offering a linear account of a shift from the bad old days of homosexual oppression to the enlightened present, the display at once

showcases historic abuses and the knowledges that inform them, draws attention to the problematics of the repetition of habituated, taken-for-granted practices (including display practices), and performatively opens up sexual pasts, presents, and futures to alternative configurations" (50). Inspired by these approaches, Sullivan and Middleton's pop-up exhibition utilized objects that would be considered "non-queer" to mainstream audiences to re-define or help define moments in these queer histories such as Richard Boyle's "Lavender Marriage" which was a mannequin with a lavender dress, a hat from WWII and a beard. These were essentially found objects assembled together to create a literal image for the gay slang and metaphor of a Lavender Marriage which was a "marriage of convenience" to hide one of the partner's queer identity (55). They addressed the institutional limits of budget and staff resistance to this different approach to displaying queer history, but ultimately this playful and risky exhibition demonstrated a potential for queering display, in part, through its resistance to the norm of what is and isn't a queer object.

Continuing to "Chapter 3: Queer/ing Meaning-Making," Sullivan and Middleton take on queering cataloging practices and collections development by questioning authority and the notion of the expert. They bring forward an example that is not queer by gender or sexuality, which is an important note for addressing queerness in collections since often times there is a misconception that an action or object has to be LGBTQI+ to engage in queering the museum. However, Sullivan and Middleton are offering more of an ethics and a methodology in their analysis of the *Lindow Man: A Bog Body Mystery* exhibition at the Manchester Museum in 2008-2009. The museum engaged in community consultation in which excerpts from seven interviews were included in the exhibition didactics. Many visitors and staff were disappointed with the information because they did not know what was "fact" from an expert versus "story" from community. Many of the critiques were around a desire to receive facts

versus engaging in dialogue and interpretation about history. Sullivan and Middleton mention, “Drawing on the work of Bruno Latour, we suggest a move away from the question of what things *mean* and towards an analysis of what things *do*, how and why” (64). *The Lindow Man* essentially unveiled the preconceived notions their publics had with the institution and a resistance to change, difference, and multiple interpretations. In facilitating an exhibition like this, there seems to be more of an undoing and unveiling of the way things are, ie heteronormative, patriarchal, hierarchical and in turn offering a glimpses of what alternatives could be in mean-making.

The ways in which unveiling and imagining alternatives can occur, could be by way of queering engagements with collections similar to that of *Lindow Man*. In “Chapter 4: Queer/ing Engagement,” Sullivan and Middleton call for community engagement that is not engagement, but rather a centering collaboration on exhibitions and collections within communities. One of the examples offered of queering collaboration is the Adelaide’s Feast Queer Youth Drop-In. The young queers would mount an exhibition at the Migration Museum in the museum’s Forum Gallery, which is intended to be an inclusive space, where the community has full agency over the narratives shared on the walls. After meeting the participating youth, Sullivan and Middleton realized they were reproducing problematic practices. They were operating in what Bernadette Lynch addresses as a “rhetoric of service” versus being within or collaborating with the community (91). They ultimately ended up participating with the youth and hired an artist to lead “drop-in” workshops in which they would not direct or have a preset notion or agenda for what the youth should be doing based on their shared identity. They ended up making badges together, which would lead participants to get to know each other a little better than a more formal verbal back and forth conversation about what the exhibition would be in the Forum Gallery. While this is a valuable lesson learned around facilitation and community collaboration in the creation

of *OUT in the Museum* exhibition, I wonder about the artist that was hired to lead the workshops that would connect the museum to the youth in a meaningful way. It is often the job of artists to remedy connections between communities and museums, yet they more often than not do not have the stable income that museum administrators do. How can we reimagine this paradigm and think about how pay equity could be illustrated in queering the museum?

While I appreciate the movement toward *queering the museum* in exhibition practices, collections management, and community collaboration, I remain wondering about the power some museum professionals have and how hierarchies within these different positions operate and facilitate queering. Someone like me who is an emerging museum professional, constantly bouncing between contract work, navigating museums as an artist and a historian aspiring to make a difference by constantly pushing projects with queer agendas, in contrast to a collections management director that has been in the same position for 30 years and who is resistant to new ways of knowing or change within a stagnant institution. I wonder about how much harm these institutions produce and how to navigate a sustainable queering for the queers like me who still don’t have health insurance, and often have enormous amounts of academic debt, solely to be considered for time-limited fellowships, and those constantly on the chopping block when it comes to staff cuts. I am left wondering about sustainable practices for those who are in vulnerable contract temporary positions navigating a more sensitive uncertainty around employment and equitable museum pay. As Cathy J. Cohen writes, “I’m talking about a politics where the non normative and marginal position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work” (438). I’m interested in a queering of the museum where these precarious and marginal positions are at the center of radical museum organizing, but who are also not left alone to advocate for themselves by themselves.

A queering of the museum should acknowledge the power structures that have geared the trajectories of museums such as white supremacy, heteronormativity, and capitalism, and work toward deconstructing and reimagining those power structures with those at the margins at the core. *Queering the Museum* leaves me hopeful for more perspectives and conversation around how queering the museum plays out for contract laborers such as contract researchers, teaching artists, and temporary museum educators. There are many more iridescent patterns to witness, illustrate, and process, but *Queering the Museum* definitely unveils resilient and reimagined museum futures.

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