

Book Review

C.M. Wilson*

Nikki Sullivan and Craig Middleton, *Queering the Museum*, London and New York: Routledge, 2020, paperback £18.99, pp.122

Queering the Museum 'is, undoubtedly, limited, partial, and imperfect, but from a queer perspective, this is as it should be' (12). The book encourages readers from the outset to push back against the idea that there is one way to pursue its subject matter. Instead, it urges readers to 'avoid conceiving museums and museological practice in binary terms – good/bad, us/them, progressive/anachronistic, inclusive/exclusory' (3). *Queering the Museum* lives into this premise, complicating and challenging binaries both formal and implicit.

In its introduction, the authors speak about their shared working context as employees of the History Trust of South Australia as well as their respective roles as curator of the Migration Museum (Sullivan) and manager/curator of the Centre of Democracy (Middleton). They describe their active engagement with museological practice and their frustration with the gap between museological practice and scholarship. The authors acknowledge, while disagreeing with, the conception of museum theory as separate from practice and the ways this gap is reinforced – in fact, they describe this as one of their primary motivations for writing this book, a statement that resonates both with this reviewer and with many potential readers. The book attempts to address the division between theory and practice, serving as a '(necessarily incomplete) toolbox' (6) with which gallery, library, archive, and museum (GLAM) workers can queer their own practices. These 'flexible tools and insights' can then be used 'in the service of radically and persistently pursued institutional change' (9).

Drawing on Irene Giaccardi's concept of iridescence, in which perception is considered as a multifocal and changing process rather than a static fact, the book problematizes heteronormative and homonormative perceptions of queer history and the 'grand narrative' of progress that posits assimilation within a largely unchallenged society as the end goal of queer liberation. *Queering the Museum* crucially contends that museum professionals must 'pay more critical attention to the ways in which implicit, but nevertheless structural and structuring idea(l)s, shape museums and the identities and actions of those who compose them' (4), levelling this critique well-deservedly at adaptive models of museums, as well as the essentialist view to which said critique is typically ascribed.

To illustrate its point, the book first 'aim[s] to provide a survey – not necessarily exhaustive – of some of the work that has been published on the various aspects of practice that [the authors] discuss', then 'develop[s] detailed analyses of examples of work that, for [them], queers traditional museological idea(l)s and practices' (8).

In *Queering the Museum*'s first chapter, 'From LGBTIQ+ Inclusion to Queer Ethics', the book establishes queering's relationship to poststructuralist epistemology, stating that it 'necessarily eschews singular certainties' (5) in favour of multiplicity and contextualized understanding. The book references Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1998) when speaking about the internalized and frequently subconscious ways GLAM professionals relate to collections, interventions, and institutions – stating for example that the 'second nature' to which Bourdieu refers can result in 'habituated idea(l)s' (26) about heterosexual and cisgender identity as the 'default' lens through which to view collections. The book speaks powerfully to the inadequacy of social inclusion as a governmental aim and 'containment strategy' (20) that seeks to align queerness with a modified but still intrinsically heteronormative ideal.

Chapter 2, 'Queer/ing Display, Queering the Museum' critiques the claim that there is an absence of LGBTIQ+ objects in the authors' collections, and that this is true of museum

collections more generally, by demonstrating that at least potentially almost all of the objects in our collections could be used to explore 'queer' (and other othered) ways of knowing and being. This chapter explores exhibits like *Oldarodle* and *Queering the Museum* (an exhibit with the same name as this book), examining how they 'trouble... the assumption that LGBTIQ+ objects are self-evident as such, and that collection catalogues capture and record the object's "truth"' (52).

Chapter 3, 'Queer/ing Meaning-making', continues to explore this tension and the way that the de-hierarchization of interpretive approaches affects museum professionals. This chapter looks at the continuing cultural shift towards inclusion and community engagement, transforming visitors from 'users and choosers to makers and shapers', and the ways museum professionals have and have not responded to the task of mediation and meaning-making (Cornwall and Gaventa, cited in Lynch 2011: 441). In doing so, the book engages with Bruno Latour's work and endeavours to 'move away from the question of what things mean and towards an analysis of what things do, how and why' (11).

Throughout 'Queer/ing Engagement', Chapter 4, the authors problematize and queer the homogenous and heteronormative assumptions around community and around consensus, arguing for a view of collaboration that embraces contestation and intracommunity differences. 'Queer/ing Engagement' examines *Out at the Museum*, *Coming Out: Sexuality, Gender, and Identity*, and *Te Ara Wairua* as three examples of community engagement that 'queers heteronormative ways of knowing, doing, and being' (100).

Throughout *Queering the Museum*, its central purpose is reiterated: that the book should serve to 'enable... us to queer ways of knowing, doing, and being that deny complexity, connection, and open-endedness' (3). While a critique of inclusion-focused practice and of 'grand narratives' that place normalizing queerness at the pinnacle of their narrative arcs is central to the book, the authors refer to both their own experiences and their supporting literature to remind us that a critique of inclusion 'does not mean that we ought not to use it, but neither does the necessity to use it mean that we ought not perpetually to interrogate the exclusions by which it proceeds' (Butler 1993: 222). Similarly, the authors do not assume that 'queering' as a method of intervention is necessarily superior to, or distinct from, other methods of engagement. Rather, the authors contend that the multifocal, contextual, and changing nature of museum practice – in other words, the iridescence of museum practice – requires that a 'range of (sometimes seemingly contradictory) tactics' be employed. As a demonstrative guide to some of these tactics, and to their necessity, this book is highly recommended for museum practitioners, academics, and anyone who challenges, as this book does, the implied dichotomies between the two.

References

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*C.M. Wilson, University of Leicester