

Do It Off Broadway: Exploring the Politics of Diversity and Inclusion in Museums Through  
Risk, Advocacy, and Queer Experience

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**Abstract**

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What does it mean for museums to be diverse and inclusive? Does inclusion just mean representation, or does it also require a degree of institutional allyship and pursuit of change? This research study seeks to explore, from a queer perspective, how aspects of risk and advocacy interrelate in creating the experience of a museum as diverse and inclusive. To explore this, a phenomenology of seven museum professionals from across the United States was conducted, all queer identified or heavily involved in diversity and inclusion efforts. Their insights were aggregated into a series of emergent themes that point towards the ways museums are “doing” inclusion now, and how they might improve. The four overarching themes which emerged were (1) inclusion tends to be measured by feelings of safety, welcome, and prioritization of the included community; (2) risk and advocacy have value to diversity and inclusion work; (3) the most prevalent barriers to inclusion efforts were direct or indirect financial concerns; (4)

individuals, rather than policy, tend to be credited with driving change. While limited by the sample's size and a lack of visitor data, results have implications for how museums can continue to develop new strategies for diversity and inclusion based on institutional identity, integration of inclusion into all museum functions, "safe" risk-taking principles, equitable hiring and employment practices, and encouragement of internal and individual innovation.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

What does it mean for a queer person to exist within the museum world? How are queer experiences influenced by and influence museums? Answering these questions is complicated by a vast array of systematic oppressive forces. Queerness subverts binaries and social expectations, not just of gender and sexuality, but of public versus the private, the mundane and the political. The way our relationships are (or aren't) put together, how we act (or don't) on our desires, how we talk (or are silent) about those desires, how we relate (or don't) to our bodies. Queerness and the experiences around it are difficult to put into words, because these things by their very nature defy definition. Queer stories fall between cracks and are forgotten, only to be unearthed by queer readers, researchers, and archivists, and placed bittersweetly into a vast shared family history. Often being alienated from our blood relatives, we rely on these shared scraps to know where we come from, how we got here, and what our place is in a society that often wants to stomp us out.

As museums have become more aware of their own place in society and in systems of privilege and oppression, there has been a move in the field towards diversity, inclusion, and social justice, including for queer/LGBTQIA+<sup>1</sup> people and stories. The American Alliance of Museums, on which many American and international museums model their policies, says:

“[AAM] respects, values and celebrates the unique attributes, characteristics and perspectives that make each person who they are. We believe that our strength lies in our diversity among the broad range of people and museums we represent. We consider

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<sup>1</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic/Agender, and other marginalized orientations and gender alignments.

diversity and inclusion a driver of institutional excellence and seek out diversity of participation, thought and action. It is our aim, therefore, that our members, partners, key stakeholders reflect and embrace these core values.” (American Alliance of Museums, 2014)

Museums currently popular within museological discourse often reflect this. The San Diego Museum of Man lists one of its values as “Open: We create an inclusive environment and welcome respectful discourse.” The Minnesota History Center mentions inclusion in both its values and its strategic priorities. Museum after museum is coming to brandish diversity, inclusion, and equity like a badge of honor.

For marginalized people, however, inclusion policy can often fall short of providing an actually inclusive environment. LGBTQIA+ people respond to studies feeling implicitly excluded by the images the museum chooses to present, or the bathroom facilities it doesn’t offer, or the lack of knowledge and respect for identity on the part of staff (Heimlich & Koke, 2008; Rawson, 2013). For understandable reasons, institutions often want diversity and inclusion to be easy and comfortable, trying to balance serving the marginalized with avoiding alienating the privileged. Yet entire fields and movements in human rights have been based off of two ideas: (1) that being a marginalized person means being endangered (physically and structurally) by privileged classes and the systems they administer, and (2) that movements and people must risk aggravating that danger in order to achieve greater safety.

This is where the need for allyship, personal and institutional, arises - it is still risky, but much less so, for a non-marginalized person or entity to stand up for the rights of the marginalized than it is for a marginalized person to stand up for their own rights. The primary

function of an ally is to address those confrontations which the subject of their allyship is unable to address. Allyship, therefore, can be said to be inherently risky, and this emerges both as a major theme of seminal works like *The Racial Contract* (C. W. Mills, 1999) and the background noise of much of the literature around allyship, guilt, and backlash behavior in allies (Bishop, 2015, p. 92-93). This is all to say that supporting oppressed groups isn't something that is or, arguably, should be easy or comfortable, or which can conceivably be done without making more privileged groups uncomfortable or alienated.

Risk, discomfort, and alienation do not have positive connotations - these are things that most people and institutions prefer to avoid, so naturally most research around these ideas is about lessening their effects. Some fields, however, have embraced risk tangentially - in business, a willingness to take risks for personal gain is often considered admirable, but risk has also begun to be applied to other economic issues as well, such as in the case of triple- and quadruple-bottom-line economics (Elkington, 1998). Another area in which there has been a degree of interest in risk in museums has been in the case of learning, creativity, and innovation (Spock, 2017). Some museums known for innovation in diversity and inclusion have explicitly incorporated risk and advocacy into their policies and procedures, including their strategic planning and approaches to institutional change. Major examples of this include, again, the San Diego Museum of Man, and the Oakland Museum of California. Given the place of institutions like these in the field, this may signal a move toward thinking harder about what it means to pursue discomfort as a way of becoming more socially active and relevant.

Despite this, there's still little understanding of how much difference this is making, or just how much museums and other non-profits are willing to risk in the name of diversity and inclusion. What really is the relationship between policies and procedures of diversity and actual

inclusive experiences? How can museums challenge and discomfort themselves in a way that hits that crucial sweet-spot between social justice and museological practice?

The purpose of this research study, therefore, is to explore, from the perspective of queer/LGBTQIA+ museum professionals and others deeply involved in inclusion efforts, how aspects of risk and advocacy interrelate in creating the experience of a museum as diverse and inclusive. The questions involved in this are as follows:

1. What does it mean, with reference to policy, procedure, institutional culture, and personal experience, for a museum to be experienced as inclusive by queer people?
2. Do risk and advocacy, as part of policy, procedure, institutional culture, and personal experience, have a role in an institution being perceived or experienced as inclusive? If so, what is that role, and can it be used to better codify how institutions can/should approach diversity and inclusion?

It is hoped that this study will help inform a continuing, meaningful dialogue about what it means for museums to represent and support marginalized populations and, in the largest sense, the role of museums in social justice.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### Introduction to Literature

Looking at the relationship between queer experiences and how museums are writing policies for and enacting diversity and inclusion requires an equally diverse approach. It's necessary first to understand the intersections, positive and negative, between the museum field and queer experience. This will lead to a larger inquiry into how social justice, policy, and ideas like fiduciary responsibility interact. Through this, we arrive at exploring the larger links between risk and the genuine pursuit of social justice.

First, however, it's important to clarify what is meant by the word "queer" (and its various close cousins such as "LGBT," "LGBTQIA+," or "MOGAI") in the context of this discussion. While I've endeavored to intersperse various of the more commonly accepted terms and acronyms for the communities which can be considered part of the larger (informal) "alphabet soup," these communities and terms are not always synonymous.

Speaking in extremely general terms, the major non-identity-related divide within the "alphabet soup" community is that between assimilationist schools of thought and liberationist schools of thought. The hallmark of assimilationist LGBT activism is the fight for same-sex marriage – a fight that hardline liberationists view essentially as an ideological gentrification of the queer movement (Johnson, 2018). While there are liberationist issues embedded in the need for marriage (especially immigration and healthcare issues), marriage was, originally, a conservative goal aimed at "civilizing" what straight, white, cisgender<sup>2</sup> people saw as upsetting the norms and hierarchies of intimacy. Contained within the focus on marriage is also an abandonment of the trans and gender diverse community that goes back to shortly after

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<sup>2</sup> Cisgender: identifying completely and at all times with one's gender assigned at birth.

Stonewall, and has included the implicit and explicit exclusion of trans voices and concerns by such high-profile organizations as the Human Rights Campaign (Roberts, 2007).

“Queer” has been selected as the main signifier here because, being emblematic of the liberationist school of thought, it explicitly rejects respectability politics. Instead, liberationist queer politics seeks to give queer people the freedom to decide and pursue what life goals, milestones, and relationships are meaningful to them, without having to justify these things, and fully inclusive of all gender and sexual identities. As written in the “Queer Nation Manifesto” distributed by ACT UP in 1990,

Being queer is not about a right to privacy; it is about the freedom to be public, to just be who we are. It means everyday fighting oppression; homophobia, racism, misogyny, the bigotry of religious hypocrites and our own self-hatred. . . . Being queer means leading a different sort of life. It's not about the mainstream, profit-margins, patriotism, patriarchy or being assimilated. It's not about executive directors, privilege and elitism. It's about being on the margins, defining ourselves; it's about gender-f--- and secrets, what's beneath the belt and deep inside the heart; it's about the night (ACT UP, 1990).

The word “queer” or unrestricted acronyms such as those with a plus sign (eg. LGBTQIA+) or MOGAI,<sup>3</sup> are used here explicitly because they defy the understanding and categorizations of the dominant group.

By extension, “queer inclusion” has been explicitly chosen in this case as an indicator of the fact that this study is done with the goal of making museums experiences more queer-friendly, rather than making queer experiences more museum-friendly, along with the knowledge that “queerness” encompasses the many intersections of gender and sexuality with other forms of

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<sup>3</sup> Marginalized Orientations, Gender Alignments, and Intersex

marginalization. When a different acronym, term, or phrase is used, it's used deliberately to refer to a different (but sometimes overlapping) subset of the "alphabet soup."<sup>4</sup>

### **Museums and The Queer Experience**

Nationally, queer inclusion has received the spotlight in the American Alliance of Museums LGBTQ Welcoming Guidelines released in 2016 (AAM LGBTQ Alliance, 2016). This document provides specific points which can be used to inform more queer-inclusive policy throughout many aspects of museum operations, and the guidelines themselves were collaboratively developed by a large group of museum professionals primarily within the AAM LGBTQ Alliance. They are broken down into the categories AAM uses to describe and evaluate museums, the standards of excellence and the functional areas, along with including a glossary of both acceptable and unacceptable terminology.

Ironically, some terms which are listed as problematic are used within the prior text of the guidelines, e.g. "transgendered" is listed rightfully as problematic (2016, p. 55) but used in an earlier entry (2016, p. 41). I point this out not in the spirit of being a "gotcha," especially given how easily mistakes like these happen when many authors collaborate on a work, but to exemplify both how easily systematic issues can be overlooked and my own positionality as a trans person forced to be hyperaware of trans-exclusionary attitudes even within the community. My first instinct when looking at anything like this is to check where my experiences have been omitted – an instinct shared by many trans people due to the previously described split in the community.

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<sup>4</sup> However, it's important to note that when others, such as participants, use various terms and acronyms, it is not always an explicit reflection of their politics, as it also comes down to personal taste and comfort with various ways of referring to one's community and self.

This distrust is magnified by mainstream acceptance, and in fact that the guidelines have been widely praised by the larger museum community, including in a video put out by AAM in which the guide is described as straightforward and “depoliticized” (American Alliance of Museums, 2017), which could be perceived as having an assimilation-focused bent. Moving into a more liberationist mindset, however, the same commentary invites continual revision and updating of the guidelines based on community voices, and in fact that video is associated with an effort which occurred in late 2017 to engage in a nationwide review of the guidelines.

There also exists a rich history of queer museum professionals, individually or in smaller organizations, interrogating the lack of coverage and support for queer issues in the museum world. Among these has been the Queering the Museum Project and the Queering Museums Podcast, along with more generally the work of the Inclusion Museum. One contributor to the Queering the Museum Project writes about the “queer blind spot” museums have had and how to define a serious “ally practice,” listing:

1. Queer visibility in the museum is radical in and of itself, and is a key component of any queering the museum project.
2. Queering the museum must go beyond exhibitions about LGBTQ history and look at museum practice as a whole.
3. Projects that prioritize queer visibility depend on the advocacy and support of institutional allies.
4. Homophobia and heteronormativity manifest in myriad subtle ways, and queering the museum must begin by raising staff awareness about these issues. (Karkruff, 2015)

In doing so, the author readily requires a degree of buy-in and, explicitly, advocacy from institutions that want to be perceived as being allies to their queer communities.

This creates one of the major problems at play when it comes to policy and inclusion: that policy-based inclusion isn't always felt “on the ground” as a full buy-in by those who are meant

to be included. As nebulous as it can be to attempt to quantify what it means for an institution to feel welcoming to a demographic of visitors, it is clear that it is a factor in many cases.

In the study “Gay and Lesbian Visitors and Cultural Institutions: Do They Come? Do They Care?” (Heimlich & Koke, 2008), it was found that visitors who identified as gay and/or lesbian did make up a significant visitor demographic, and yet their proportion of membership and donations lagged in comparison. Comfort among these visitors was tied directly to the cultural undertones present within the space in which they visited - gay and lesbian people felt less comfortable and welcome in spaces that implicitly privileged heteronormative experiences and ways of knowing. When asked what privileges non-LGBT visitors enjoyed during a museum visit, responses from lesbian and gay visitors followed three major themes: “the ability to be demonstrative, feeling represented within the content, and feeling accepted with the context” (Heimlich & Koke, 2008, p. 98). This aligns, of course, with common symptoms of queer oppression in other contexts - an inability to openly identify and perform one’s identity without consequence, lack of visibility and representation, and having to endure attitudes hostile to one’s existence.

This story doesn’t change with trans and other gender diverse visitors and researchers and can become even more complicated. For many trans, non-binary, and gender diverse people, the closet is an even more fraught concept - the dysphoria<sup>5</sup> of being untransitioned, socially and/or medically, must be weighed against the ultra-visibility of transition itself, something which can be both radically and painfully public in its many aspects. Discretion can often not be an option in the same way it can be for some cis/gender-conforming GLBQ+ people, because disclosure

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<sup>5</sup> Dysphoria: In the context of transgender experience, the mental suffering involved in being misgendered by society.

isn't just about one's partners but the entire way we are named by and present ourselves to the world.

Within this milieu, trans peoples' relationships with organizations and institutions can be equally fraught. As discussed in "Administrating Gender" by Dean Spade (2013), part of this is due to the fact that many organizations and institutions, including the government, collect and at times require display or disclosure of one's sex/gender. For a cisgender (non-trans) person, this is as easy as disclosing one's sex assigned at birth. For a trans, non-binary, genderqueer, or otherwise gender diverse person, on the other hand, this is a minefield - do we disclose our actual gender, our sex assigned at birth, our legal gender? All of these can be different and carry different consequences. For example, an insurance company could deny treatment for cervical cancer to someone for whom they have the gender "male" on record, because they presume that "male" means "without a cervix." In museums and archives, consequences can manifest when one is required to provide an ID to access resources, including queer-related resources.

Beyond the collection of data, trans people face other barriers within museums, such as in regards to general awareness of how to respect trans identities. In "Accessing Transgender // Desiring Queer(er?) Archival Logics," K. J. Rawson (2013) writes about "environmental accessibility" and what it means for trans users of museums and libraries. According to Rawson, environmental accessibility "is determined by 'the feel' of a space and the way a person is treated in that space" (Rawson, 2013, p. 546). Environmental inaccessibility can manifest not just in spaces without any protections for trans people, but in spaces with performative or skin-deep protections - such as spaces that claim to be inclusive of "LGBTQ" issues but have resources only for cis gay and lesbian people, or where staff are not trained not to assume visitor pronouns (Rawson, 2013, p. 548). Seemingly small things like spaces without gender neutral

restrooms or with gender neutral restrooms that are inconvenient to access are incredibly hostile to trans and especially non-binary and non-“passing”<sup>6</sup> people (Rawson, 2013, p. 546). This reveals the importance of considering inclusion from the standpoint of challenging privileged assumptions - inclusive design, policy, and practice aren’t just about adding new representation, they’re about thinking critically about systems already in place.

Issues of everyday accessibility are intimately tied with larger ways in which queer stories are marginalized within academic and museological discourse. For instance, museums’ focus on the “public” may seem innocuous, but “popular” and “public” are complex concepts in queer experience. This is because separations between the “private” and the “public” or “political” are socially constructed and are thought to reinforce oppression by creating a discourse of silence and secrecy around sex and gender (Sanders, 2008, p. 22). If we don’t ask people who they are attracted to, we can (and do) assume that they are heterosexual. If we don’t ask people how they identify, we can (and do) assume that they are cisgender. As most famously theorized by Foucault, when museums decide certain topics, like gay sex or trans bodies, aren’t “family friendly,” or serving the “public,” they reinforce the idea that non-straightness and non-cisness should be kept out of the public sphere, that to discuss gender or sexuality is “invasive.”

This discourse of silence becomes “self-perpetuating” (Mertens, Fraser, & Heimlich, 2008, p. 89) in exhibits and programming, from front-end studies that assume that gender is binary to exhibits which operate within this binary to summative evaluations that then see that binary as a natural result rather than built into the entire process (Mertens et al., 2008, p. 89). Even when queerness is deliberately brought front and center, the narrative remains a safe one

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<sup>6</sup> “Passing” is a somewhat outdated term among trans people which is meant to indicate the degree to which, before or after medical or social interventions, a trans person is correctly gendered by strangers.

from this perspective: stories of activism and those out of the closet that, while important, continue to reinforce the closet and eclipse the many complex facets of a community which has lived and largely continues to live in said closet (not to mention facets and times in history where the closet doesn't/didn't exist) (R. Mills, 2008, pp. 44–45). To bring the full queer experience into the museum means challenging the very idea that there is a “private” sphere, and how we talk about things within it.

Consider the example of queer inclusion in the case of history museums. Historically, non-cisheteronormative ways of being were medicalized and politicized by social currents in the nineteenth century, and queerness was subsequently made into something that could only be spoken of in public if it was framed in highly clinical, specific terms: homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality, paraphilias, etc (Foucault, 1988). Other forms of speaking about sexuality and gender have become strictly private, thus rendering many forms of being non-cisheteronormative (those not easily categorized and normalized) incoherent in “public” contexts such as museums. Museums will speak of the “out and proud” when doing diligence to queer historical figures like writer and playwright Tennessee Williams, but would be hard pressed in most cases to highlight Williams’ “Hard Candy,” (1959) a famous historic example of evading anti-queer censors which involves suggestive allusions to fifties queer men’s cruising/public sex culture - and the morally complex lines of kink and consent contained within that culture.

Far from being purely hypothetical, this difficult balance has been replicated in museum practice by and around queer people. A curatorial team who put together Chicago History Museum’s 2011-2012 exhibit *Out in Chicago* were forced to make hard choices between what to include and exclude in the exhibit, despite positive feedback for the inclusion of more risqué materials from queer community advisors. Among the objects and stories that were forced to be

cut against the curators' wishes were a "wheel of debauchery," a kind of spin-the-bottle type game that documented historical queer women's sexuality (Austin, Brier, Herczeg-Konecny, & Parsons, 2012, pp. 189–190), and a large segment of an oral history of BDSM and leather/kink communities and their connections to how queer people create their own families and relationship dynamics (Austin et al., 2012, p. 195).

Also addressing the ways museums will tend to "sanitize" queer life, art, and history, Patrik Steorn, queer museum tour guide and curator of *Queer. Desire, power, and identity* (2008) at Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, has written about the "normalizing" effect of museums. That by institutionalizing the anti-institutional, queer collections can be "straightened up" and cease to have the same meaning to the queer gaze (Steorn, 2010, pp. 135–136). In a way reminiscent of Karkruff (2015), discussed earlier, he even goes so far as to posit meaningful queer inclusion as have the potential to alter the overall function of the museum, writing,

[Museums seeking to be queer inclusive] should allow for queer presences to occur on their own terms rather than co-opt LGBT culture as a way to seem more radical than they really are. Museums should instead facilitate the production of queer meaning in their collections by innovative display, ground-breaking research and encouraging subversive social events on their grounds. New ways of involving the LGBT community on queer matters might actually prove to be the path that leads to new directions for the social role of the museum (Steorn, 2010, p. 136).

### **Policy, Economy, and Justice**

It follows, then, that a full commitment to queer inclusion requires disrupting the moral assumptions of cisheteronormative society - a group of assumptions tied in with, among other things, economic exploitation, misogyny, racism and white supremacy, disability rights, and ecological damage. From the perspective of the ruling/funding class, queer inclusion that goes beyond "love is love" is dangerous - which complicates things when museums are beholden to their funders for financial support. In this case, there seem to be two options: attempting to work

outside the funding model or attempting to find a funding model that doesn't prioritize profit over people. Whether a non-profit museum can survive outside of the funding model is a possibility that requires more exploration, but there have been some inroads into the idea of the decentralization of profit within the current model.

Within economics, the centralization of profit is contained classically in the role of the "bottom line," in reference to the final line in a budget which marks the net profit. However, since the 1990s and, arguably, earlier, a line of thinking known as Triple- or Quadruple-Bottom-Line economics has emerged (see e.g. Elkington, 1998). This adds two or three new "bottom lines" - the social, the environmental/ecological, and the cultural. In the business world, this has led to the proliferation of "benefit" and "social purpose" corporations that seek to turn a profit while also, ostensibly, being good to the earth and those who inhabit it. For museums, multiple bottom lines offer a crucial point of "translation" between fiscal goals and education or justice-related goals, along with a way to think of funding as something that should serve a museum's mission, not shape it.

In the non-profit advocacy world, there is a great amount of distrust for funders, and for good reason: while right-wing foundations have been found to give out millions of dollars with few strings attached so that conservative institutions can focus more on capacity-building and less on fundraising, left-wing foundations are known for treating non-profits like "disobedient children" who need to be closely watched over and regulated (Covington, 1997; Le, 2017; Paget, 1998; Shuman, 1998). This risk aversity on the part of funders translates to risk aversity on the part of the funded – social justice focused non-profits seem to always be on the edge of insolvency, and museums are forced to choose between functioning under a "reliable" model of neutrality and authority or truly innovating new ways to serve their communities.

In understanding organizational success and effectiveness as multifaceted rather than only based on 1- or 3-year financials, some foundations are beginning to allow more risk-taking by engaging in what's come to be called trust-based grantmaking (Le, 2016). This model, developed by the Whitman Institute, introduces several guiding principles that allow non-profits to be less nervous and more nimble in the way they achieve their goals. Trust-based grantmakers "provide unrestricted, multi-year funding," put the burden of due diligence on themselves ("we do the homework"), endeavor to engage in equal rather than imbalanced partnerships, have open-door communication policies and feedback channels, are transparent and streamlined, and provide more than just financial support, such as by "providing spaces for reflection" (The Whitman Institute, 2018).

It isn't just the politics of funding that complicate the actions a museum can take, however – museums are also bound to an extent by their tax-exempt status. Most museums are filed under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code as "charitable organizations." This restricts their ability to engage in local, state, or federal politics – as defined by the IRS, a 501(c)(3) "may not be an action organization, i.e., it may not attempt to influence legislation as a substantial part of its activities and it may not participate in any campaign activity for or against political candidates." Museums that engage with social issues, therefore, have a complicated tight-rope to walk, especially when it's a hot-button issue of the day, lest they lose their tax-exempt status.

An understanding of business beyond the financial bottom line could provide a road-map and inject some hope into this situation, though. Businesses have, historically, thought of non-financial concerns as trade-offs which must be made at the expense of finances, but triple- and quadruple-bottom-line thinking is challenging the idea that there needs to be conflict between

financial and non-financial bottom lines in the first place. As business strategists Andrew Savitz and Karl Weber write when describing what they call the “sustainability sweet spot,”

It could be said that the truly sustainable company would have no need to write checks to charity or “give back” to the local community, because the company’s daily operations wouldn’t deprive the community, but would enrich it. Sustainable companies find areas of mutual interest and ways to make “doing good” and “doing well” synonymous, thus avoiding the implied conflict between society and shareholders. (Savitz & Weber, 2013)

The solution for museums therefore becomes perhaps not a painful back and forth between mission, values, and restrictions, but establishing an institutional identity which is empowered by and confident of its unique place in the fight for justice.

### **Risking It All for Social Change**

Risk and justice, of course, go beyond the financial dimension - there are social and personal risks that people contend with in the pursuit of anything new to them or to society, in creativity and in social justice. In “Exploring the Emotional Landscape of Risk and Failure,” museum professional Dan Spock (2017) writes about how creativity, innovation, and learning are inextricably tied with failure and anxiety. He writes, “When we encounter something new, it unsettles what we believe we know, or believe is true. Perplexity can feel like a threat. Many reflexively react to perplexity with resistance, hostility or denial.” Teaching children to mentally and emotionally deal with this as they learn about the world around them is a central part of early childhood learning - as put forth by learning theorists like Jean Piaget (e.g. Piaget, 1952, 1954), children’s (and learners’ in general) reactions to new information is not to accept it, necessarily, but rather to rationalize it with what they already know.

The fact that *any* new information can be perceived as risky means that educators have to then work even harder to maintain credibility when that new information goes against societal

beliefs and biases. One way in which this is sometimes done is through immersive or theatrical experiences that challenge the viewer to see an issue not in terms of their own schema (framework for understanding the world), but rather from the perspective of a different time or social or economic class. A current museum example of this is the Follow the North Star program (2018) at Connor Prairie (an outdoor museum in Indiana), which puts visitors in the shoes of escaped slaves to teach them about the horrors of slavery and of the modern racist systems that continue to uphold many of its goals. On the other hand, some types of programs solve the problem by allowing visitors to help each other through the experience and to come to conclusions on their own, such as in the case of teaching about immigration issues through dialogue-based programming during tours at the Tenement Museum in New York City (2018). Museums have been indirectly working to solve the problem of risk-aversity for years by trying to solve the problem of how to help visitors learn most effectively.

Paradoxically, however, museums' and other nonprofits' internal workings have remained fairly risk averse and continue to be regarded with suspicion by more activism-centered organizations (see e.g. INCITE!, 2017). This is tied to the financial issues discussed previously, but also to deeper systems of privilege and oppression. Under the Racial Contract, theorized in Charles W. Mills' book of the same title (1999), financial and social success in Euro-American society are directly tied to white supremacy and the exploitation of non-white peoples. Any full-scale effort against white supremacy therefore requires not just the lessening of oppression on people of color, but also the direct rejection of white supremacy and privilege by white people.

Far from being irrelevant to the struggles of queer people under cisheteronormativity, racism and queerphobia are intimately tied together by the history of pathologization and

eugenics (see e.g. Clare, 1999; Foucault, 1988; Hobson, 2005) and so too does literature on allyship in general echo the demands of the rejection of white supremacy in many ways. Anne Bishop, for example, writes in *Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in People* that, “Most people resist beginning the process of becoming an ally because it is so difficult and painful...Coming to understand your identities as an oppressor is often an enervating process...There is guilt, which drains energy. There is always that unsettling knowledge that you cannot see what is going on as clearly as the oppressed group can.” (Bishop, 2015, p. 92-93) Being an ally isn’t just about the performance of waving a flag or lighting up a building in rainbows, it’s about being willing to be unsettled and to accept guilt without being paralyzed into inaction. Being an ally means embracing risk.

### **Conclusion**

Understanding the ins and outs of queer experience and of the work of non-profits leads to an inevitable conclusion – that without risk-taking, there is no institutional allyship. Yet there are a multitude of systematic forces which seek to make museums risk-averse, such as restricted funding, policy-based barriers to advocacy, and social norms which privilege the status quo. The question, therefore, becomes, how can the experiences of queer professionals be understood and leveraged in such a way as to help clear a path forward for meaningful diversity and inclusion work in museums?

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

The purpose of this research study was to explore the relationships between risk, advocacy, and experiences of inclusion and diversity in museums, from the perspective of queer individuals. The questions involved in this were as follows:

- What does it mean, with reference to policy, procedure, institutional culture, and personal experience, for a museum to be experienced as inclusive by queer people?
- Do risk and advocacy, as part of policy, procedure, institutional culture, and personal experience, have a role in an institution being perceived or experienced as inclusive? If so, what is that role, and can it be used to better codify how institutions can/should approach diversity and inclusion?

Initially, this study sought to broadly explore the feeling of museums as inclusive compared to their policies and practices around inclusion through a series of parallel methodologies of document analysis, interviews, and focus groups. However, as research began under this methodology, problems and concerns on the part of both researcher and participants arose, and so the methodology underwent a revision during data collection.

The methodology selected in order to make the needed changes was a phenomenology of queer experience in museums surrounding approaches to diversity and inclusion, including how people from marginalized groups gave weight to aspects of diversity and inclusion work like policy and practice, institutional culture, and ideas like advocacy and risk. Phenomenology was chosen specifically because it allows for an investigation and analysis of subjective personal experiences as endlessly nuanced and interconnective with culture, identity, and history.

### **Sampling**

Based on the author's own positioning as a queer museum professional, a sample of queer museum professionals and other museum professionals highly involved in diversity and inclusion work was selected. This was with the hypothesis that this demographic occupies the two different communities (the museum community *and* membership in or proximity to a gender/sexuality/romantic marginalized group) "equally" and with established thought towards their intersections.

Towards this end, participants were selected based on being well known openly queer/LGBTQIA+ museum professionals who see their identity as intersecting with their work, or recruited based on open calls to queer/LGBTQIA+ museum professionals and museum professionals who saw inclusion and/or social justice work as a significant part their job or career. These options were chosen out of sensitivity to the fact that, unless openly identifying on a regional/field-wide/national scale, LGBTQIA+/queer people can often be in complex situations regarding whether or not they disclose their identity and how comfortable they are with being identified even within the community. Even though the author is acquainted with many queer museum professionals, not only would this have created a more biased sample, but knowledge of someone else's status as a gender/sexual/romantic minority is highly privileged information that the author felt would be disrespectful to take advantage of for the purposes of academic research.

### **Instrument and Protocol**

Half hour interviews were conducted with those professionals who agreed to participate. These interviews were semi-structured, and included questions regarding the amount time the individual had been working in the field, the state of policy around diversity and inclusion at their institution or at others they've worked with, how they've seen their institution(s) interfacing

with the queer community, and questions around the use of words like advocacy and risk where they've worked and in the work they've done. The interview instrument can be found in Appendix A.

In all, seven interviews were conducted in person, over the phone, or by email. Interviews conducted in person and over the phone were recorded on two separate voice recorders (for redundancy) for transcription purposes. The researcher took any additional notes and observations by hand, as to avoid the effect of a computer screen creating a barrier between himself and the participant.

### **Analysis Procedure**

Interviews were analyzed individually, and then aggregated based on emergent themes in answers to different questions. Among those aspects which were analyzed are the content of the answer, the implicit denotations and connotations the participant gives to the words used in the questions, and the implicit value placed on the answers to questions. Also analyzed were lengths of time in the field and positions within institution, so as to give context to the positionality of participants as a whole and their range of experiences. That said, except in cases where participants opted into having their identifying information shared, only gender pronouns have been linked directly to participants.

### **Limitations**

This study has important implications for the ways queer museum professionals think about and experience diversity and inclusion in museums, and how they balance their own experiences with their work and their institutional goals. However, without data from non-

museum-affiliated queer/LGBTQIA+ individuals, it's difficult to truly understand whether efforts toward diversity and inclusion are "working." Given more time to develop relationships, collect data, and analyze it, it would be ideal in the future to follow up this study with a more thorough evaluation of diversity and inclusion policy and what aspects of it change minds and create trust. It also would be ideal to have a larger and more geographically and demographically diverse sample.

### **Chapter Four: Results and Analysis**

Seeking to understand queer inclusion on a deep, experiential level, seven museum professionals were engaged in approximately half-hour semi-structured interviews. An effort was made to pull experiences from different geographic and demographic locations and positionalities, along with different areas of museum practice. Participants currently work in four different states, representing the west coast, northern Midwest, and northeast United States. They hold diverse positions, from volunteer coordinators to directors, curators, and consultants. These interviews were recorded with their permission, and therefore an effort has been made here to represent their voices as faithfully as possible when quoting their responses. All participants as part of their interviews were asked for their gender pronouns, which will be what is used when it is necessary to refer to any participant individually.

This analysis has been organized by interview question, and then by emergent themes within each question, with discussion and examples of themes following – note that separated block quotes indicate separate interviews, not paragraph breaks. Chapter Five further discusses overarching themes and implications.

#### **Question One: Time at current museum and/or in the museum field**

This question sought to give context to the perspective each person would have on the questions to follow, by giving context to the timeline their experiences would fall on. All participants had been in the museum field and at their current institution for at least five years, and up to 22 or more years - estimates participants gave were often rough and didn't always count internships or volunteer work. On average, they had been in the field or at their institution for at least 13 years. The median is also at least 13 years.

**Question Two: What policies/procedures does your institution, or those you've worked with, have around diversity and inclusion? (Follow-up: Do you see things like equity and inclusion happening because of policy, or in spite of it?)**

This question had one original goal, of ascertaining the state of diversity and inclusion policy at participants' institutions and how well they perceived those policies as meeting their needs. However, responses also interestingly revealed how each participant's position within their institution affected their answers.

**Emergent themes:**

- Employment law

*So of course we can apply from a policy perspective all of our federal, state, and local EEO laws...*

Two participants spoke explicitly about employment law and what it means for their institutions in terms of diversity and inclusion. This included Equal Employment Opportunity laws and state, local, and federal harassment and discrimination protections. One participant was quick to add that the museum's own policies went beyond these as just a springboard, and the other also said that the museums he had worked with "took guidance" from these sorts of government-level mandates. The latter did mention, however, that he had "only worked in really blue states" as a caveat to this - implying that the case may be different in more conservative areas, whether in terms of the laws themselves or the way museums there apply them.

- Human resources issues and employment practices

Three participants explicitly mentioned their Human Resources (HR) departments and policies, and one participant referenced volunteer onboarding procedures, which have also been counted under this theme. Concerns here included how staff and volunteers were being treated in

their workplace, how they were being trained to interact with a diverse public about inclusion-related issues, and how employees and volunteers were recruited and onboarded.

Answers that fell under this theme were related to the participant's position within their institution. One participant directly involved in HR spoke at length about her institution's approach to making employees feel safe and welcome through things like training and allowing staff to specify their pronouns, along with practices aimed at recruiting a more diverse pool of candidates for staff positions by removing unnecessary requirements (like education requirements) from job postings. Similarly, the participant involved in volunteer management spoke at one point about the way she trains volunteers:

*I train them definitely with the sense that history is not objective, and oftentimes people come in thinking it is. But we talk about subjective bias in a lot of different ways. And so I train people to kind of have those difficult conversations and how to kind of bring things out in visitors without being preachy.*

This participant used "I" on the basis that this was a personal call on her part, and this mirrored the multifaceted way in which other participants spoke of HR and internal policies around diversity and inclusion: that they could lay some groundwork and cover legal bases, but in some ways lagged behind individual and department goals and institutional culture.

- Field-wide trends and culture

Three participants explicitly mentioned the American Alliance of Museums, especially the AAM LGBTQ Welcoming Guidelines discussed in Chapter Two in answering this question - and almost all participants mentioned the Guidelines at least once within the interview as a whole. This included efforts to use the guidelines as a roadmap for creating and implementing policy for LGBTQ+ inclusion, but also how much the guidelines represent larger cultural changes in AAM and in the field as a whole. One individual said,

*For example, 20 years ago, AAM produced a report on D&I. No one associated with that, to my knowledge, uttered a word about transgender communities. Today, the same tenets of inclusion developed years ago are in place for each of us to broaden our understanding and welcoming of all visitors.*

This was representative of many of the more hopeful perspectives that participants conveyed.

Another participant, the founding director of a new museum, noted that he had chosen to take more action on diversity and inclusion out of a perceived lack of full commitment to it in his previous experiences.

*[The museum] was formed in response to what wasn't happening in museums, specifically history museums and county historical societies, and seeing policies that were exclusive and weren't protecting staff, weren't protecting audiences, weren't serving collections in any way and only really served to alienate people.*

This sense of change and action, even when it wasn't outright stated, was evident in every participant, but also laid the groundwork for the final theme emerging from this section, that of the tension between individual and institutional change-making.

- Individual versus institutional action

*I think in all my experiences policy is the lag. The things that I have seen work have been because of people, and often they are people with individual commitments who are willing to support projects or looking for ways to bring in their own ideas of inclusion into their labors. Whether that's - I guess despite the fact that that's not a formal mandate to do so.*

Most participants, especially when asked follow-up questions surrounding whether they thought policy was the driving force of their diversity and inclusion efforts, were quick to say no. Change and action were almost always attributed to individuals rather than institutional mandates, other than in terms of employment/onboarding practices. There was also mention of the temptation to have policy stand in for internal and external communication and diversity in input and leadership:

*I think policies are super important and they can help people stay focused on filling in things like gaps with diversity, but yeah I think people can also get really hung up on*

*policies doing the hard work that really needs to come from within, to have conversations at the board level, staff level, and with audience, too.*

*So there's a long road to go to kind of match the- you know, what I think the institution maybe feels in its heart or talks about in conversations among staff and how it's perceived by the public in terms of diversity and representation.*

**Question Three: How would you characterize the contact, if any, that your institution or those you've worked with has with local queer/LGBTQIA+ communities?**

The goal of this interview question was to gauge how/if participants' institutions worked with local communities, and how they perceived, valued, and treated these partnerships.

Interestingly, most participants interpreted this more on the basis of contact with individuals rather than organizations.

**Emergent themes:**

- Individuals as community connection

While several participants did give examples of partnerships or other work with local LGBTQ organizations, most put the most weight on individual community connections - such as with community leaders or through queer or LGBTQIA+ identified staff members.

- Outreach and public programs

Three participants listed outreach-type activities (community engagement, working with schools, internship placements) or public programs (queer-related talks, tours of historic queer neighborhoods) as a form of community contact.

- Exhibits (and collections?)

One participant characterized community contact at his organization in terms of intentionality towards representation and inclusion.

*And, you know, for example, looking at a slate of partnerships or exhibit opportunities, and you know saying this is only really representing the white perspective. And we may love this project, we may love working with this person, but is it on mission? If we are seeking to be truly equitable, then that means that there are some projects that we don't do, because first we have to bring in some others to tell - we have to sort of create space to tell stories for people who might not find their way to us naturally.*

This idea of prioritizing and planning for diversity and representation from the start was fairly unique within the sample given the young age of this participant's institution, but the implications of it could be felt in another response which referenced exhibits:

*It actually impacted collecting as well, so we put out a call for artifacts as part of [a queer] exhibit because we realized how few we actually had that were specifically - at least marked in a way that were easily found.*

It underscores an important connection - how museums that aren't collecting purposely toward representation can be limited by diversity of their collections when it comes to the diversity of stories they can tell.

**Question Four: Do you see your institution, or those you've worked with, as being an advocate, or engaging in advocacy?**

The goal of this question was, explicitly, to ask whether participants thought of their institutions as advocates and/or as valuing advocacy and, implicitly, to gauge a response to the terms "advocacy" and "advocate."

**Results:** Two participants answered had relatively unequivocal "yes" answers. Four had answers which were positive but came with conditions or reservations. One didn't feel like the question applied to his current position. Zero participants gave "no" answers.

**Emergent themes:**

- “Flirting” with advocacy

Over half of responses (4 out of 7) were conditional - participants believed their institutions, or those they had worked with in the past, engaged in advocacy in some senses of the word, but with restrictions or reservations. Some of these reservations included concern about losing funding sources, losing 501(c)(3) status, or public perceptions and responses:

*Our 501(c)(3) doesn't allow us to engage in advocacy beyond a very very small level. And so - we do - it's a word or a term that we flirt with a lot.*

*I think we try to be neutral. Although I think with some of the programs that we do and how we market those programs, we if not advocate at least show a level of comfort with that . . . for us, the challenge is, and this is a constant source of frustration for the equity work that we do, you know we're 65% funded by our state legislature. So that plays a huge role in terms of where the leadership here, including the board, their level of comfort with how we advocate about certain things.*

*We - it's interesting when you work for a museum or for an organization you have to be careful of what level - we're [a] pretty new organization and where appropriate may provide some advocacy but we're not a political organization.*

*...but we certainly like receive negative press for that. I think it's hard, I think that we do really - I do and I know that a lot of my colleagues especially who are in the education department, they really feel strongly about museums as spaces for advocacy and believe that museums can take a stand and a side. And yet we know at the same time again that we are here to represent all voices and that includes our traditional museum viewers.*

The only participant whose answer almost approached a “no” to this question had the perspective that his institution and museums in general are in a way empowered by not explicitly taking sides. He first said,

*I don't know that I think it should be [our mission] as a museum, I don't think that we should really be promoting a viewpoint, but I think we can do really good work to identify those who are doing good work to promote it and to sort of elevate them or give them a platform or the resources that they need.*

As he further discussed this, he framed it in an even more subversive light - that museums could use the rules created to keep them out of politics to their advantage in telling stories in a way that advocates but which isn't automatically alienating to those who want information to be neutral.

*But I think that the way it ends up I think working in our favor in a kind of passive aggressive advocacy way [laughs] is with that equitable thing, it does keep us from falling into the trap of where - this happened a lot at the organization I was at before, the history museum, is people would say well that's great, you told the story of the Klan through the African American lens, but what about bringing in somebody who's worked in the Klan to tell their side? And I don't believe that there's benefit in that, I don't think that's the way to engage in that type of storytelling. And with that equitable piece we're able to come back to that and say, well we're not looking to have two people equally tell this story, we're looking to make up where there's a gap.*

- Internal versus external advocacy

One avenue in which participants saw their museums taking a more advocacious role was through internal activities rather than visitor-facing activities. This was interesting in allowing institutional culture and internal policy to be shaped by advocacy-based ideals, while avoiding direct pushback from outside the museum.

*We are creating employee resource groups internally and our first employee resource group will be with our queer employees. And there will be an element of advocating from the group, at least internally within the institution.*

*And I think we also just try and make a good environment for our staff, we have conversations amongst ourselves where we are constantly thinking about like okay, with for example the Black Lives Matter movement, how do we as a museum respond in our own individual jobs as well as kind of as a whole PR-oriented way. So I think that sometimes again we do that less well, like I wish we did a little bit more with our social media that was for advocacy.*

*But that that is something that staff talk about a lot, is like we have these commitments and we have like a individual desire to advocate for something, but then how do we create a space where people can learn, and be reflective, and think critically, without pushing them towards a particular outcome.*

In other instances, though sometimes in the same response, were direct, public approaches to advocacy. These included programming and exhibits, community interactions, and even approaches to structuring membership.

*So this year we've implemented a program where we are - there's a follow-up program about the same [conversation] topic like a month or so later. And then is kind of like a workshop where you basically have that call to action. . . . So we'll see how that works, I think it's really exciting that we're kind of trying to do that. But I would say that there is that kind of call to action in - implicit in a lot of our exhibit goals.*

*....we organized a whole consortium of museums that were all situated near each other in Balboa Park to march in the pride parade last June, and that was the first time that Balboa Park had marched as a, like a group, in the parade or even participated in the parade before. So - And also when the same-sex marriage came down from the Supreme Court a few years ago they displayed a huge pride flag from the tower of the building and you know that's a huge public statement. And there was pushback about it but the museum didn't waver at all in its defense of that act. So I really saw that as a very welcoming, you know, brave outspoken act.*

*For example, we've been trying to come up with a different name for membership, because like at our core we're always deconstructing things and trying to understand ways that it might be a barrier to access. And the word membership in itself can also be a barrier....but what we wanted to call it was, we basically want to call them advocates instead of members. And so the idea is that they come, they're inspired by us, and part of what they can give back to us is by sharing our work out in the community.*

A common theme in external advocacy, understandably, was that it was extremely topic- and context- dependent. Staff thought long and hard about what they wanted to take stands on.

*Some of our exhibitions we have done some advocacy and some we have not. So I can't say yes this is what we do because it really is - we have to make the decision if that particular topic aligns with our core values and our mission.*

**Question Five: Would you say that your institution, or those you've worked with, takes risks in promoting diversity and inclusion?**

The goal of this question was, explicitly, to ask whether participants thought of their institutions as risk-taking and/or as valuing risk and, implicitly, to gauge a response to the term "risk."

**Results:** Three participants had straightforward "yes" responses. Four again had positive responses but with conditions and reservations. There were again zero "no" responses.

**Emergent themes:**

- Risks are valuable

Every participant had a positive response to this question, and many were quick to want to talk about the things that their institutions were doing that they felt set them apart. Often answers referred back to the previous question about advocacy, directly connecting the two concepts.

*...we take a lot of risks, and the way we do it is, actually a mentor of mine in the museum world once said, "take risks, fall quickly, fall often, but be sure that you do it off Broadway." [laughs] Meaning, you know, kind of, don't draw a lot of attention to yourself, and figure out a way to fix it and get back out there quickly.*

*I do think that we've taken a lot of risks through - especially through programs, which is actually a great way to do it, because people just kind of self-select out of the stuff that they don't wanna hear. I feel like the things we were able to do in our [queer] exhibit and kind of going forward there was near and dear to my heart. . .So yeah, I think that we try and offer a menu of things and not all of them take risks but some of them do.*

*Yeah, I think we take risks. One, in the type of exhibitions and programming and work that we do. . .You know, all of our exhibitions tend to have somewhat of an advocacy or political stand, we had an exhibition on marijuana and it wasn't just about marijuana, it was about social justice and the prison system and policies related to that. We had our Blank Panther exhibition, we had had one on the royal court of San Francisco. . .Even our food exhibition is really about food justice. And so in many ways all of those are related to diversity and inclusion and access and who has access and who doesn't.*

*. . .we have an exhibit on indie video games. Which doesn't seem like that's gonna be the gayest thing that's ever happened, but you know our curator really goes out of their way to find content that's been developed by people who are not just, you know, straight white men. And it's been interesting to just see how the stories and the content of those video games is different when it's developed by a LGBTQ person, by a person of color, by a person with a disability. You tend to – as I was saying before, like the being at the table to kind of create what that content is just makes a huge difference. And I think that's where the risks are really particularly powerful, is when, you know, you're doing something that you wouldn't – that the visitor wouldn't ordinarily associate with the LGBTQ community.*

*I think that, you know, creating my department, elevating my role to a leadership level, those are all things that are risky in the museum field, because they just didn't exist before. . .But you know I think really looking at inclusion being internal rather than just program content or research content, I think is something that - a lot of resources go into educating our colleagues and those types of things. Which, I don't know if it's a risk per se, but it's not how museums or this place tended to operate five years ago.*

Even with all these positive responses, many once again had worries or reservations, many of which mirror the anxieties that were voiced around embracing the term “advocacy” in the previous question. When framed in terms of risk, participants were even more open about the specifics of these anxieties, which have here been broken down into three main categories: risk to educational credibility, risk to authority, and risk to public image and funding/donations.

- Risk to educational credibility

Worries about taking risks that revolved around education goals mainly had to do with feeling as though taking too many risks with diversity and inclusion could alienate people who may still be learning how to be more accepting. There was a lot of concern around trying to balance comfort of more diverse audiences with not going so far as to make more traditional audiences feel like it wasn't worth engaging, or like the museum was acting in a biased way.

These concerns reveal a lot about how much inclusion work is impacting the question of what a museum “should” be doing.

*Because we were afraid that it would be seen as alienating. And then in turn would make us not a space where people would feel comfortable having [conversations] in a real*

*way, because they feel like we were too biased in a way. So I understand why some of those decisions were made.*

*We do these Facebook Live interviews, we did our last one in November and then we'll start the series up again, and these are on our Facebook page and are super raw, zero production value. . . But I mention that because there are a lot of things that have come out of that that I almost flinch as I'm trying to see it through a million different lenses. Thinking how some people may watch it and think oh wow, good for them for pushing the envelope, and others might say, is this really the job of a museum of any kind?*

- Risk to authority figures

Some participants attributed caution to the choices of leadership and other decision-makers, and felt that even when lower-level staff members were willing to take risks, it was hard without “leadership buy-in.” Another mentioned authority in the context of the importance of strategy in receiving and responding to pushback for risky moves.

*So I feel like I'm able to take some risks both personal and professional. . . And I think sometimes we take risks as an institution as well, um, I think sometimes we don't. I think sometimes we play it too safe. I thought that in - again I think that it's hard. I think what you don't say oftentimes indicates that as much as what you do say. I feel like when we don't take risks it's on the side of what we don't say. So I think around the [2016] election. . . around the Black Lives Matter movement, around some other things. I think we could have taken risks and said more than we did in a public facing way. I don't think we had leadership buy-in to take that stand.*

*And so when we get any kind of pushback, and it could even be a board member saying, hey, this thing is bothering me, we're very quick to not question where the criticism is coming from but to look at, is it valid, is this something that we could improve upon.*

- Risk to public image and donations/funding

By far, however, the most concern around taking risks was attributed to concern about the museum's public image and the related ability to bring in donations and funding. Throughout the interview many participants, regardless of their place in their institution, worried or felt restricted by worries that being more explicit about queer inclusion and/or inclusion in general could negatively impact the museum's public image and, by extension, its financial stability.

*Given that we are privately funded. . . I think that's the thing I most often hear expressed, is you know how we need - how is this going to impact donations. . . we do often hear, "what are the donors gonna think," and even as we're planning programs here, we're, I think - the program planners tend to have quite a liberal political range that doesn't match all of our donors. And so even in our planning some conversations have come up where donors approach leadership and saying things like, you know, "why did you bring this person into museum even though you claim not to be political," like "it looks to me like you're supporting something really political by just inviting that speaker."*

*I was talking to people about what they had in their collections that they identified as LGBT, and what they did with those. And so I was mostly talking to collections managers, but at that time many of them had similar concerns even about who was making the donations. I would [hear] stories of like this artist that we know is gay and there's all this documentation that he was openly gay and his paintings reflect sort of homoerotic gaze. But the material was being donated by a sibling who never would use the word gay and didn't identify him as such, and so there was a real fear around, if we make that claim, how will that affect the people who are making the material donation?*

*But it does make me feel sad, I feel like I have a different opinion, but I don't know I'm not, you know, I'm not responsible for this museum's fiduciary future either. You know, so kind of thinking about it in a long term way, I understand that sometimes you need to be a little bit more conservative.*

That said, there were instances in which participants mentioned caution about this but also mentioned ways in which their fears were lessened. This included branding the museum in ways that let people know that they'd be encountering new ideas right away, and stories of other institutions planning for financial backlash but instead being met with support.

*I also think that our focus on innovation has helped change our direction a little bit, even in the minds of our trustees, some of whom are conservative some of whom are pretty liberal, so it's kind of a mixed bag that way too. But that sense of pushing boundaries is actually really a big part of what our objectives are.*

*And their director told us that they had made a plan to prepare for a loss of funding and to prepare for sort of a public outcry against it. They even like trained their board members to figure out how to respond to that and what they told us afterwards is that they did have some people say explicitly I'm canceling my membership or I'm not supporting you, but they also - they brought in a lot of new support. So for them, the financial impact ended up being a net positive - that was verbally communicated, I don't have statistics.*

Another participant felt empowered to take greater risks by his institution's smaller size and still-developing audience, though he was quick to mention that he sympathized with larger museums being less flexible.

*For us taking risks means something a lot different to an organization with an established donor base or you know even a physical building that's trying to attract a regular audience. So we are very aware of the fact that we can do all these things that seem real gutsy and great, but I don't know that I would ever say that every other museum needs to be doing that.*

**Question Six: Are there any examples or favorite stories that immediately spring to mind for you when you think of meaningful actions museums have taken toward diversity and inclusion?**

This question wasn't directly asked of all participants, because it came about organically during the third interview and was then brought to subsequent interviews. The goal here was to give participants the chance to talk about things they found uplifting, and to therefore see if there were commonalities or trends in what made experiences of inclusion in museums meaningful, powerful, or inspiring.

**Emergent themes:**

- Feeling safe and welcome

Many of the responses to this question were very personal stories of either feeling included themselves or seeing visitors feel included for the first time - experiences that participants all seemed excited to talk about. All of these stories were in connection to direct actions taken by a museum - the installation of gender neutral restrooms, the display of inclusive flags and signage, or the opening of a queer-related exhibit.

*You know, I had already transitioned and so was always just using the men's room, and it was no longer something that I needed, but the really powerful thing it communicated to*

*me was that somebody cared. And that they cared enough on an institutional level to put a lot of time and resources into getting that right.*

*And the museum I worked at was a over 100 year old institution, very kind of, you know, in a sort of snooty part of town where all the other museums were, and not necessarily the most accessible to people who don't feel like museums are their places. But you know the transformation of our bathrooms into all gender restrooms and putting a pride flag on the door to, you know, communicate that it was a safe space. And then watching visitors come in and be like, "I didn't know this was here, I've never been here before, this is so great, everyone is so friendly, I'm coming back," . . . And you sort of change minds about what a museum is for, what it's about, who's invited, who's included, and that's really powerful.*

*But it was packed, there was just so much emotion that was present in people, they were talking about recognizing people or relating to stories. Many of them came up to us throughout the night and just expressed this sense of - that they never thought they would see something like them in an institution like [ours]. That they - there was a way in which that represented a welcoming into a sort of mainstream institution that they didn't believe they would ever be a part of, that they expressed a warm response to.*

- Seeing and participating in change

The other common thread through many of these responses was seeing or especially being a part of institutional change. Participants described moments that motivated their own work in diversity and inclusion, projects they were proud of, or brave actions taken by other institutions that they admired.

*I mean I also love it when an organization does a really brave thing, like when – after the Muslim travel ban, like MoMA put out all of the special signage on all of their artwork that was created by artists from those countries, to just like bring the issue front and center for visitors. And I think there's other examples of that kind of work which I find really compelling, too.*

*I would have to say creating the department that I run is a big source of pride for me, in terms of being able to advocate for that and continue to agitate until it was created.*

*You know, I guess in terms of like a-ha moments for me, in my development, like going to see the exhibit Mining the Museum when I was in kind of a museum fellowship program as an undergrad. That exhibit to me was groundbreaking, that and Field to Factory. . . Those were two exhibits that for me it was like a-ha moments in terms of like, wow, there's so much that we're not telling in our traditional historical narratives. So those I think were kind of epiphany moments for me.*

*...several museums are doing explicit LGBTQ programs, many related to artists and art. I also applaud institutions like the Carnegie in Pittsburgh, which have appointed diversity officers.*

### **Summary of Analysis**

These results have been aggregated into the following Table 1.1, organized once again by question and then emergent themes and other associated data. Analyzing the data as a whole, four overarching themes emerge: (1) that inclusion tends to be experienced as safety, welcome, and prioritization; (2) that risk and advocacy have value to museum professionals engaged in diversity and inclusion efforts; (3) that financial barriers are a prominent limitation on diversity and inclusion work; and (4) that individuals, not policies, tend to be changemakers. These themes, and their larger implications for museum practice, will be explored in Chapter Five.

*Table 1.1 Data Summary*

Question	Data and Emergent Themes
<b>Time at institution/in field</b>	<b>Range:</b> at least 5 to 22+ years <b>Average:</b> at least 13 years <b>Median:</b> at least 13 years
<b>Policy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Employment law</li> <li>● Human resources issues and employment practices</li> <li>● Field-wide trends and culture</li> <li>● Individual versus institutional action</li> </ul>
<b>Community contact</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Individuals as community connection</li> <li>● Outreach and public programs</li> <li>● Exhibits and Collections</li> </ul>
<b>Advocacy</b>	<b>Yes:</b> 2 <b>Conditional:</b> 4 <b>No:</b> 0 <b>N/A:</b> 1
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Flirting” with advocacy</li> <li>● Internal versus external advocacy</li> </ul>
<b>Risk</b>	<b>Yes:</b> 3 <b>Conditional:</b> 4 <b>No:</b> 0 <b>N/A:</b> 0
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Risks are valuable</li> <li>● Risk to educational credibility</li> <li>● Risk to authority figures</li> <li>● Risk to public image and donations/funding</li> </ul>
<b>Inclusive experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Feeling safe and welcome</li> <li>● Seeing and participating in change</li> </ul>

### Chapter Five: Conclusions

This study sought to use the lens of queer experience, especially in terms of advocacy and risk, to better understand how and how well museums are approaching the growing trend towards diversity and inclusion. The study worked towards answering two primary questions:

- What does it mean, with reference to policy, procedure, institutional culture, and personal experience, for a museum to be experienced as inclusive by queer people?
- Do risk and advocacy, as part of policy, procedure, institutional culture, and personal experience, have a role in an institution being perceived and experienced as inclusive? If so, what is that role, and can it be used to better codify how institutions can/should approach diversity and inclusion?

Seven phenomenological interviews were conducted with museum professionals who identified as queer and/LGBTQIA+, or allies who were heavily involved in inclusion work in the field. In these interviews, many themes emerged which have been discussed in Chapter Four. In this chapter, these results will be further integrated into the major themes discussed in the conclusion to Chapter Four, and their implications and limitations will be discussed. These four overarching emergent themes are:

(1) while more direct experiential data, especially from visitors, is needed to make stronger assertions, the experience of inclusion seems to map to feelings of safety, welcome, and investment in shared goals;

(2) risk and advocacy are valuable to diversity and inclusion efforts;

(3) the most prevalent barriers to diversity and inclusion efforts were concern over retention of funding and audience;

(4) policy tends to codify changes in institutional culture and practice through individual or team pressure, rather than creating change itself.

### **Inclusion Means Safe, Welcomed, and Prioritized**

When asked about instances of inclusion that they felt stood out, most participants spoke about times they felt that a museum, whether their own or another, had explicitly welcomed queer people into the space through some choice or action, such as introducing gender neutral restrooms or throwing a queer-focused exhibit opening party. Several of these stories included (paraphrased) examples of dialogue with queer/LGBTQIA+ visitors or staff:

*“I didn’t know this was here, I’ve never been here before, this is so great, everyone is so friendly, I’m coming back,”*

*“I’m so glad that you’re screening this, we’ve never shown any movie with that kind of content in it, it’s really great that you’re doing this and I’m so glad we’re talking about these things here at the museum.”*

*Many of them came up to us throughout the night and just expressed this sense of - that they never thought they would see something like them in an institution like [ours]. That they - there was a way in which that represented a welcoming into a sort of mainstream institution that they didn’t believe they would ever be a part of, that they expressed a warm response to.*

One participant who shared his own experience of feeling included in a museum space he’d previously felt excluded from had similar thoughts:

*. . .but the really powerful thing it communicated to me was that somebody cared. And that they cared enough on an institutional level to put a lot of time and resources into getting that right.*

All of these experiences communicate similar feelings - that these individuals connected being specifically reached out to by the museum with the feeling that the museum was “friendly,” worth coming back to, giving time and space to their interests and needs, and cared about their wellbeing.

These findings share many similarities with the findings of Heimlich and Koke’s (2008) study of gay and lesbian visitors, mentioned in Chapter Two - the markers of being included being “the ability to be demonstrative, feeling represented within the content, and feeling

accepted with the context.” It also evokes the words of *Queering the Museum* contributor Xander Karkruff (2015), the “myriad subtle” manifestations of homophobia and heteronormativity that museums must confront, revealing that these institutions, despite being in liberal or fairly liberal locations, had been unknowingly excluding queer people from their audiences. When not explicitly included, people had felt implicitly that they were not welcome - ““I didn’t know this was here, I’ve never been here before””, “they never thought they would see something like them in an institution like [ours].”

### **Risk and Advocacy Have Value**

Whether implicitly or explicitly, and even with caveats and conditions, every participant saw risk and advocacy as part of their institution’s diversity and inclusion practice. Participants tended to want to avoid the term “advocate” or “advocacy” more than the term “risk,” worrying about its connections to political action and activism - either due to believing it violated their museum’s 501(c)(3) status or due to believing in general that museums have a different role to play in social justice compared to explicitly advocacy- or activism-related organizations.

A common concern brought up in regards to risk, advocacy, and inclusion, throughout conversations with participants as a whole and often as talk that continued beyond planned interview questions, was the idea that when pursuing social justice, museums need to find a “middle ground.” One participant, a curator who came from an academic feminist background, mentioned that she had to struggle when she first came into museums, trying to find the balancing point between serving the mission and goals of a traditional museum environment and getting diversity and inclusion right. The director of an upcoming museum spoke to both his

frustration with what museums couldn't do and the power he believed museums wielded in being seen as educational rather than activist institutions.

Several participants related this balancing act as being made more complex with the current political climate - given diversity and inclusion are currently so heavily politicized, how can museums engage without being accused of "influencing legislation" or "participating in campaign activities"? Zeroing in on this would be an interesting and relevant direction for future study, especially if it could help identify a museum/activism "sweet spot"(Savitz & Weber, 2013). Part of this may include interrogating and problematizing the binary of "political" and "non-political" in more strength and detail (Mertens et al., 2008; R. Mills, 2008; Sanders, 2008) - in a society in which non-normative identities are inherently politicized, the idea of a non-political practice of diversity and inclusion is very complicated indeed.

### **Concerns about Funding and Donations Limit Inclusion Work**

The most common risk that participants' museums weren't willing to take for diversity and inclusion was toward alienating donors and funders, a result that was at once stark and unsurprising given the discussed anxious and mistrustful relationship that museums have with funders (Covington, 1997; Le, 2017; Paget, 1998; Shuman, 1998) and with actions that might alienate significant visitor bases. These concerns were brought up throughout the interview process, and in most cases far outstripped concerns that diversity and inclusion might affect educational impacts or might be resisted or lead to blowback from voices of authority in the museum. This was true whether or not the museum was publicly or privately funded, and also extended beyond danger to financial donations and into danger to collections donations.

### **Individuals, Not Policies, Are Changemakers**

Few participants put a great deal of stock in the ability of policy to be used as a tool in diversity and inclusion efforts. More often, changes were happening “on the ground,” and subsequent policy then sought to catch up with those changes. Many participants saw having diverse people in leadership and decision-making roles as the key to pursuing diversity and inclusion throughout the institution. The biggest role given to policy was in the realm of employment and human resources laws and practices - which help make those decision-making positions more accessible to a more diverse range of people.

### **Implications and Limitations**

Diversity, inclusion, and equity work is a growing presence within the museum field, motivated by both an emerging awareness of modern and historical injustice and greater representation of diverse groups among museum professionals. This study offers a new avenue for understanding how inclusion work in being done in the field, and how it might be honed, improved, and strategized in the future.

Even in the presence of many sets of guidelines and best practices, the data here appears to indicate that many museums and staff are still struggling with the harder trade-offs that come with pursuing diversity and inclusion. They’re unclear where the line between inclusive and political advocacy rests, or if there is a line at all. They worry mainly about loss of funding and incoming donations, but also about losing credibility with visitors, losing support from leadership, and losing sight of their missions. They are willing to take risks and see risks as important to the work, but less willing when they don’t know exactly how much they’re risking. Some paths to solve these problems which may be worth exploring include:

- **Leveraging (and/or shifting) institutional identity:** Participants came from very different institutions, and often reported the greatest success where they were able to take advantage of their institution's unique strengths or shift their missions to be more broadly inclusive of diversity concerns.
- **Making diversity and inclusion goals part of all museum activities:** Rather than allowing inclusion concerns to be compartmentalized, making these concerns the business of every department (including development/fundraising goals and practices) could help avoid the need for hard compromises.
- **Engaging in more confident, "safer" risk-taking:** "Do it off Broadway"! – risks don't have to be huge to be meaningful. They can be made more approachable through audience research, communication with other institutions, small-scale experimentation, and collective action among individuals and institutions.
- **Hiring and prioritizing diverse voices,** especially in leadership, including being willing to deprioritize privileged voices.
- **Encouraging internal, individual innovation and agitation:** If changes are indeed coming from individuals, institutions can help set a stage and tone which encourages idea generation and implementation at all levels of employment.

Actions like these could serve to promote diversity and inclusion as an integrative, intentional way of operating as an entire institution, not just an abstract visitor-oriented goal.

The small scale of this study limits its ability to make concrete assertions and recommendations. In subsequent studies, it would be worthwhile for a larger and more geographically and demographically diverse sample to be used, especially gathering insight from inclusion efforts in more rural and conservative areas and institutions. It is also yet to be

extensively studied how queer/LGBTQIA+ people, and other targets for greater inclusion, who are not involved in museums relate to museum goals and strategies around diversity and inclusion. This perspective would provide an even clearer lens on what trade-offs and pay-offs there are to confronting ideas of advocacy and risk in museum work, and what strategies are the most effective in creating inclusive experiences. Ironically and unfortunately, there's a great deal of perceived risk involved in doing and participating in this kind of research – the scope, direction, and methodology of this study was changed for the comfort of some initial participants who worried that what they said about how their institutions were doing inclusion might affect their positions. This indicates a great deal about the long road that awaits further efforts to interrogate and improve diversity, inclusion, and social justice efforts in museums.

Nonetheless, the perspectives present here are invaluable to understanding how, why, and how well museums “do” inclusion. Each and every participant cared deeply about the work they and their museum were able to do and were incredibly invested in that work. All were proud of the gains they had made, while at the same time seeking constantly to improve. Their dedication gives hope to the idea that museums can evolve beyond their colonial roots into institutions that will, eventually, figure out what role they have to play in a more just, inclusive, and equitable world.

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**APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT**

I am asking you to participate in this interview as part of a research study being conducted in partial fulfillment for the degree of Museology Master of Arts at the University of Washington. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how museum policy, procedure, and practice around inclusion and advocacy relates to the experience of a museum as inclusive by LGBTQIA+/queer individuals.

Your participation is voluntary, and you can end your participation or choose not to answer a question at any time without any penalty. If you experience any discomfort, I'm happy to provide a list of psychological support resources. I will not ask you how you identify within the LGBTQIA+ umbrella and you are not expected to give me this information. I will only collect information on your identity if you choose to disclose it in the course of answering these questions.

I am recording this interview, but only I will listen to the recording for transcription purposes.

In publication you may be referred to only by your gender pronouns. If you'd like your name, institution, title, or any other information attributed, please feel free to indicate this to me at the beginning of the interview, or following it.

If you have any questions now or in the future, you may contact me via e-mail or phone.

Do you have any questions? Do you agree to participate in this interview?

What pronouns would you like me to use for you? Is there any other identifying information that you'd like attached to this interview?

How long have you been working in the museum field?

What policies/procedures does your institution, or those you've worked with, have around diversity and inclusion? Do you see things like equity and inclusion happening because of policy, or in spite of it?

How would you characterize the contact, if any, that your institution or those you've worked with has with queer/LGBTQIA+ communities?

Do you see your institution, or those you've worked with, as being an advocate, or engaging in advocacy?

Would you say that your institution, or those you've worked with, takes risks in promoting diversity and inclusion?

Are there any examples or favorite stories that immediately spring to mind for you when you think of meaningful actions museums have taken toward diversity and inclusion?