



C O L L E

C T I N G

Q U E E R



A HOW-TO
COLLECTIONS GUIDE
FOR QUEER OBJECTS

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For Molly, Dad, and Momma

Thank you for seeing me.

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Getting Started

Who is this for?

This document is a guide for collections professionals in galleries and museums. While archival or library professionals may find this document useful, its contents are based on standards released by the American Alliance of Museums: the *Core Standards for Museums*, the *Code of Ethics for Museums*, and the *Welcoming Guidelines for Museums*.

This document only uses the collections stewardship and curation standards listed in the *Welcoming Guidelines*, which interprets (and lists) the *Core Standards* and *Code of Ethics*. References to specific sections are listed where relevant.

How do I use it?

This document is a collection of reference points which can be read together, or as individual units. The first part of the document reads the *Welcoming Guidelines* in a practical way and provides step-by-step suggestions for its application to collections professionals. The second part provides an optional explanation of the academic and theoretical foundation for the learning outcomes in the first.

Collections professionals already familiar with museum queering may find it most practical to focus their learning around “In Practice”. It is recommended, however, that users reflect on the comfort and understanding they have of these topics and read all sections unfamiliar to them. The practice of museum queering is dependent on past histories, lived experiences, and necessary context.

Introduction

This project is as much a rumination on objects as it is on queerness. Queerness as in sexuality, and queerness as “other.” Queerness as in its Neolithic root word: to turn and twist away. For queerness is indelibly linked to our bodies and the objects they (are made to) turn away from. Our bodies turn toward and away from the objects of our revulsion, our giddiness, our acceptance, our resonance. Our turns—our queerness—define the space our bodies occupy, and in turn impress upon our bodies and our queerness.

Bodies use objects and belongings as bookmarks: sites of orientation, disorientation, destruction, and definition. People invest—as in the root of the word, to clothe or cover completely—and project themselves into and onto the world with stuff. *Collecting Queer* asks in part how we can identify our bodies and the belongings they use in space and interprets the ways collections professionals can benefit from this knowledge.

To do so, *Collecting Queer* sits at the intersection of phenomenology, object and material studies, museum studies, and queer theory as a contributor to the growing movement of museum queering. Sullivan and Middleton’s seminal *Queering the Museum*—the first such monograph on the topic—provides the theoretical groundwork for applying queer theory to museum display, engagement, meaning making, and ethics.¹ Sarah Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* also sits at the core of this project for its pioneering approach to queerness as a method of object making. As such, Ahmed, Sullivan, and Middleton underscore the general approach of *Collecting Queer*, and this project aims to wield this base of knowledge as a tool for actualizing unclear collections standards. Despite the academic trend to discuss museum queering, little in the way of practical application to the “day-to-day” has surfaced within that trend.²

The focal point for addressing this issue is the *Welcoming Guidelines for Museums*: a set of standards which ostensibly queer the American Alliance of Museum’s (AAM) *Core Standards* and *Code of Ethics*. The LGBTQ Alliance, an AAM working group, offers the *Welcoming*

¹ Nikki Sullivan and Craig Middleton. 2020. *Queering the Museum*. Routledge Museums in Focus. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group: 8.

² Sullivan and Middleton. 2020. *Queering*. 6-8.

Guidelines as a set of “concrete tools to help museums incorporate LGBTQ diversity and inclusion into their understanding and pursuit of excellence.”³ Yet the *Guidelines* provides minimal explanation and no suggestions for the application of its concept standards; what Sullivan and Middleton describe as the “gap” in museum queering praxis.⁴ Museum professionals often don’t even know how to identify queer objects or the institutional practices which (dis)allow for their place in museums. With practicalized steps, the *Welcoming Guidelines* can cross the Sullivan-Middleton gap and begin to change museum spaces in earnest.

What exactly do we mean by “museum” though?

Because the term “museum” is fraught and, at times, insufficient. Its varied meanings include aquariums, zoos, science centers, art history galleries, botanical gardens, natural parks, historical houses, “selfie-bait” pop-ups, battlefields, and more. Museums can be for-profit or non-profit; be private or public; consist of a few objects or hundreds of thousands.⁵

Different roles inhabit different places within the museum, and different museums offer different places to inhabit. An interpretive planner at a historic house has a far different scope of work than a similar role at an aquarium. Even roles in the same museum, within the same places, can inhabit and use those spaces differently: a docent and a curator move around a display space for their own distinct purpose though those purposes may overlap.

Even the preeminent authority on American museums, the AAM, doesn’t have a good answer.⁶ The International Council of Museums (ICOM) is one of few authorities worldwide which provides an explicit definition, that:

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets, and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible, and inclusive, museums foster diversity and

³ LGBTQ Alliance Professional Network. 2016. “Welcoming Guidelines for Museums.” Project report. American Alliance of Museums: 3.

⁴ Sullivan and Middleton. 2020. *Queering*. 6.

⁵ *Ibid.* 1-2, 4.

⁶ Though federal grants and other funding they support are restricted to organizations with certain attributes.

sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally, and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge sharing.⁷

So, what exactly does this tell us about the “standard,” normative museum?

This most recent evolution of the ICOM definition uses so-called service-based language (“inclusive... [diverse]... [sustainable];” “participation of communities;” “offering... experiences;” “knowledge sharing”): value markers which Mark O’Neill describes as the hallmark of the “adaptive museum.” Describing the museum with service language seems to place the goals of the ICOM museum into opposition with what O’Neill deems the hierarchical, “essentialist” museum: institutions which by contrast collect for collection’s sake and view themselves as arbiters and righteous protectors of heritage.⁸ The adaptive museum creates services based on their communities’ needs by adapting the collection to meet them.⁹ Given the service-based language in ICOM’s definition, the ICOM museum must be an adaptive one.

Yet another perspective on the ICOM definition reads it as collecting heritage for the express purpose of its “service to society.” Reading the ICOM definition this way, it claims that a museum *must* collect, protect, and show heritage to create the institution, even as the language it uses is adaptive. That the collection of heritage, and not community impact, is the end goal, implies O’Neill’s essentialist model instead.¹⁰ So then is the ICOM museum an essentialist one?

It's hard to tell, but that’s not entirely ICOM’s fault. Their definition is not arbitrary, incomplete, or unfounded. In fact, hundreds of meetings and consultations over a yearslong process taking place around the world yielded the above definition.¹¹ Given that museums lack any common epistemology, however, the muddled values in this definition aren’t surprising.¹²

⁷ Standing Committee for the Museum Definition. 2022. “Extraordinary General Assembly.” Meeting minutes. Prague, Czech Republic: International Council of Museums: 12.

⁸ Sullivan and Middleton. 2020. *Queering*. 5.

⁹ Mark O’Neill. 2006. “Essentialism, Adaptation and Justice: Towards a New Epistemology of Museums.” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21 (2): 96-97.

¹⁰ O’Neill. 2006. “Essentialism”. 97.

¹¹ Standing Committee. 2022. “Extraordinary”. 2-10.

¹² O’Neill. 2006. “Essentialism”. 99.

ICOM's definition underscores the difficulty museums face in communicating who they are, what they do, and what they believe. The static definitions institutions use for the vast range of organizations called the "museum"—saying nothing of the just-as-diverse people (and bodies) which run them—acts as a normalizing agent that applies certain sets of values to museums and reduces them to roles based only on the objects and belongings in their care. Since queering seeks to address and embrace the abnormal, this project embraces a different definition for the normative museum.

This project considers objects as a way of building the museum, and how queerness warps that construction. It understands the museum as a site of lived experiences with objects, rather than as a specific institution based around a *kind* of object. It understands that objects can, should, and will change with the experiences of the people who use them. It understands that in fraying the identities of objects through their own lived experience, queer people reveal fruitful places for discussion and growth, which benefit any museum.

Collecting queer means understanding the museum as fluid; as not just capable of change, but constantly susceptible to and inviting of it. To view the museum as otherwise—as concrete, stable, and righteous places protecting objects from society in posterity—ignores how people have used and needed objects since time immemorial.

In the sections that follow, we explore the steps we can take as collections professionals to identify, acquire, and care for queer objects. We approach how we can find queer objects in our collections, and how we can alter organizational practice to better accommodate them. We also build out vocabulary and context for queer objects and the queer people related to them. Finally, we articulate the ways institutions must change to sustain support for queer objects for the future.

Rethinking our collections in this way dignifies queerness, protects queer objects and their histories, and honors queer people with the attention, respect, and consideration they deserve.

In Practice

Step One: Identifying Queer Objects

To care for queer objects, we first have to find them in the spaces around us. Let's start with the big picture.

In general, every object carries with it a personal history: the places it has been; the people who have used it; and the reasons it exists. Some histories are tangible, while many are intangible. Often, histories are both, and one is not more concrete than the other.

Take, for example, a vase with a large crack in its structure. Its physical wear is evident on its surface, which can provide a collections steward certain guesses as to its history. An adept steward might then explore how the crack got there using tools and analytics to contextualize this history with research done by their institution and others. That steward might conduct visual analyses of the designs, modes of creation, and other objects related to the work. Sometimes, objects such as these bring documentation, like provenance records, to assist in this work.

The crack on the vase is a tangible history, showing wear-and-tear this object endured. *How* or *why* that crack appeared is the work of intangible histories. Perhaps this vase was temporary and meant to be smashed, or it was thrown from a high place and managed not to break completely.

Museum professionals catalog, record, and often also extract patterns amongst tangible histories to create trends which signal certain communities of origin or cultural practices. Tangible histories often signal intangible histories, and vice versa.

Often...but not always. There are objects which do not always carry both kinds of histories equally, and some kinds of objects which do that more often than not.

Enter the queer object.

Just as with any object, a queer object has histories. Simply put—a queer object is an object with a queer history. Except queer objects rarely have tangible histories in many (but also importantly

not all) cultures. With the legacy of Western colonialism present in many places across the world, (hetero)normative rhetoric and systems of discrimination have made tangible histories of queerness historically dangerous. Queerness is also an inherently invisible aspect of identity, and highly intersectional; there are no physical “markers” of queerness, and the effects of sexuality can change depending on the community one hails from. So queer objects often are defined by the intangible histories and queer people connected to them, rather than by tangible histories.

Let’s see what that means in practice through a story by Paerau Warbrick:

Paerau Warbrick tells the story of two of his ancestors, Tūtānekai and Hinemoa, who are one of the most famous love stories from Te Arawa, his home confederation, and from New Zealand Aoteroa at large. Tūtānekai was in love with Hinemoa, but they would not be together because Tūtānekai was of a much lower class of kinship. To express his love, Tūtānekai played a kōauau flute from his home on Mokoia Island every night, and every night Hinemoa would swim from southern Lake Rotorua all the way to Tūtānekai, unable to bear being apart from him. After a time, the two became betrothed, and eventually bore children; Warbrick and many other Māori from the Bay of Plenty are their descendants.

Before, during, and after Tūtānekai and Hinemoa were together, however, Tūtānekai also had a “deep and loving relationship” with Tiki, a man he was “stricken with love for.” Tūtānekai himself defines their relationship as takatāpui: “an intimate and emotional relationship with a person of the same gender, [which] includes Māori gay, lesbian, and transgender people.”

In what ways could we contextualize Tūtānekai’s kōauau as queer? Is it as simple as retelling the story of Tūtānekai’s kōauau with greater emphasis on his love for both Tiki *and* Hinemoa?

Not quite. Tūtānekai’s love for his two paramours predates the Christianization and British colonization of New Zealand Aoteroa. To call it explicitly queer on those merits implies that Tūtānekai’s family and community considered his love to be outside the norm. That does not mean, however, that queer Māori in the current day do not find solace, comfort, or recognition in this

story. In fact, Warbrick points out that the presence and recognition of takatāpui is an act of Indigenous resilience and resistance which defines contemporary Māori society at large.¹³

To describe Tūtānekai's kōauau as queer *requires* contemporary takatāpui to contextualize the belonging within their experience and placing that at the core of the belonging. Doing so it also means honoring lifeways and sciences which Māori elders and knowledge keepers have used to tell and retell the story of Tūtānekai's loved ones and acknowledging that Tūtānekai, Hinemoa, and Tiki's ancestors continue to look after, keep, and care for Tūtānekai's kōauau, which is under their care as a taonga.¹⁴ Some museums grappling with postcolonial realities are unwilling to engage in this level of care.

This belonging can be a queer one with the proper considerations made to its specific context and its continued relevance to Māori takatāpui. This object is as queer as the intangible histories which tie it to contemporary queerness.

Take also for example, depictions of the Catholic Saint Sebastian primarily during the European Baroque period, or portable record players in the Mid-Century West. Authors have described both as examples of queerness adopting objects to signal queer histories.¹⁵ For four hundred years, depictions of St. Sebastian have shown him shirtless and eroticized, with a body which changes depending on the interests of the painter. For just a long, queer audiences have identified with, and found interest in, his coy religious ecstasy, and depictions of St. Sebastian have themselves become queer. Portable record players too, for transforming barns, basements, and spare rooms into private discos and parties where, for the first time, lesbians could express their love and interest without fear of reproach.¹⁶ These objects were not created with the intention—or visible marker *per se*—of queerness. Their intangible histories lent to them by their queer contemporaries make them a queer object.

¹³ Chris Brickell and Judith Collard, eds. 2019. *Queer Objects*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press: 29-35.

¹⁴ A taonga/taoka is a “treasured item.” The term is applicable to varied aspects of Māori life, and English does not offer an equivalent which carries the same connotations. The kōauau resides at the Rotorua Museum Te Whare Taonga o Te Arawa on behalf of the Tapsell whānau.

¹⁵ Brickell and Collard. *Queer Objects*. 187, 373-374.

¹⁶ The use of portable record players in lesbian communities is attributed in Brickell and Collard, but it stands to reason that other queer communities may have benefited just as well.

It is worth noting, however, that some queer objects *do* have tangible histories and visible markers of their queerness. Take for example a self-portrait by Gary Lee, a Larrakia man who lives in northern Australia, done at the turn of the century:

The cover of Dino Hodge’s book *Did you meet any malagas?*¹⁷ displays a self-portrait by Gary Lee (Larrakia), completed in graphite and colored pencil. Gary sketches himself shirtless in dark pencil, with an uncolored, outlined hand embracing him from behind and placing itself over his heart.

Did you meet an malagas? is a biographical social study chronicling the experiences of queer, indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory during the 20th century. *Did you meet* places particular emphasis on the relations of queer white settlers (whitefellas) with queer indigenous Australians (blackfellas). Gary Lee identifies himself as gay and created this self-portrait with the book’s subject matter in mind.

In what ways can we consider this a queer belonging?

Observers with no knowledge of the book’s subject matter could very well interpret the unseen subject holding the figure of Gary Lee as a man engaging in queer intimacy. With the context of Hodge’s research, it becomes even more likely that an observer might see these two figures as queer men. Knowing that Lee identifies as queer himself, and that the image is a self-portrait, makes it a decisively queer object. In this case, Lee’s portrait is explicitly queer, offering a tangible history. The intangible history of this object—Lee’s identities and personal history—also provides important context tied indelibly to its tangible history.

¹⁷ A malaga is a word for “man,” with the phrase “Did you meet any men?” referring to meeting men in a queer context.

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So, putting it all together:

- * Queer objects are objects with queer histories, tangible and/or intangible.
- * Queer histories are more-often-than-not intangible, so they rely heavily on contextualization.
- * Queer objects must have relativity to contemporary queer people.
- * Queer objects do not need to have queer creators, but very well can.

With the ability to identify queer objects under our belts, we can address the specific institutional practices which serve to support the care and acquisition of queer objects.¹⁸

Step Two: Changing Practice

Changing how we practice collections stewardship can build better collections and communities. For a collection steward can only work using community knowledge and their own lived experience. If their lived experience does not provide the intangible histories necessary for understanding an object, community knowledge comes into play. If the community in question keeps insufficient or extracted knowledge, the object's histories can become skipped over, erased, or warped. When this happens, collections care can become destructive.

In many museums, objects were more-often-than-not acquired, stabilized, and contextualized by staff from communities which did not originate or create an acquired object. While those practices have changed in many places, its legacy persists.¹⁹ Many objects often have little connection to the acquirers which kept, and continue to keep, them. In North America, socio-economic and racial discrimination lent by Western colonialism means that colonizers made and retained systems of power in museums which stole and collected objects from non-European communities. Collections

¹⁸ To learn more about how we make meaning and spaces with objects, see "In Practice."

¹⁹ Fiona Cameron. 2004. "Digital Futures II: Museum Collections, Documentation, and Shifting Knowledge Paradigms." *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals* 1 (3): 249-260.

staff at museums such as these have insufficient knowledge about many objects and their place(s) in their communities. Their histories were extracted and recontextualized, not shared or cared for.

Museum practice now tends to reject such an essentialist use of objects, but colonial legacies remain. Ideally, objects in postcolonial museums honors histories kept by knowledge keepers as core to experiencing an object. Moreover, communities of origin would have agency and say over the heritage they create. By dignifying their creators’ lives and histories, the intangible and tangible once again become connected.

What ways can we practice this in our collections?

Documentation and Registration are fundamental considerations for the acquisition and care of any object. Queer objects especially rely on well-documented, rigorous, and compassionate policies that defends their unique histories.²⁰ Access, equity, and use of queer collections involves taking extra steps to protect queer histories and identities in the face of legal or social pressure.

AAM Collection Stewardship Standard (§D.2; D.5-G.1)	<i>Welcoming Guidelines</i> Standard (§D.2.a-c)
<p>The museum legally, ethically, and effectively, manages, documents, cares for, and uses the collection.</p>	<p>In LGBTQ communities historically excluded from participation in the social and educational functions of cultural organizations, it is essential to demonstrate “open door” visibility of administration and operation of the museum to earn and keep public trust.</p>
<p>Guided by its mission, the museum provides public access to its collections while ensuring their preservation</p> <p>The museum allocates its space and uses its facilities to meet the needs of the collections, audience, and staff</p>	<p>There is a long and unpleasant history of LGBTQ individuals and their partners being disowned and/or rejected by families, employers, and organizations, or of partnerships in life being erased or disinherited in death. If personal property or papers are being collected by or about such individuals or groups, clear chains of ownership should be carefully established.[†]</p>

²⁰ Effective policy frameworks which can be amended for this purpose can be found in Marie C Malaro and Ildiko Pogány DeAngelis. 1998. “Chapter III: Collection Management Policies.” In *A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books.

	Museums may need to develop or adjust collection policy to accept archival material from extra-legal families and heirs.
	Museums may receive requests from transgender figures, donors, and the families or estates of trans individuals to update the names and/or pronouns associated with materials in their collections. †

† Many jurisdictions have inadequate legal supports for many queer families and individuals. Some queer romantic and sexual partnerships cannot create legal deeds which lists every party involved, especially in the case of heirs and estates. It may also be the case that there are different involved parties than those reflected in legal documentation, or that the identity of the parties involved are not legally recognized.

The museum should make every effort to note these differences and provide access to affected parties in additional to legal requirements.

Research Accessibility, Contextualization, and Standardization is crucial to scientific and teaching collections. Queer objects rely more than any other object on research to legitimize their place in space. Intellectual and institutional openness helps forward related fields and build trust with queer communities.

AAM Collection Stewardship Standard (§D.3)	<i>Welcoming Guidelines</i> Standard (§D.3.a-c)
The museum’s collections-related research is conducted according to appropriate scholarly standards.	Minority-community collections may not be supported with a wealth of directly-related research that is easily accessible. It is incumbent upon the museum to document, fact-check, and peer-review research in LGBTQ-specific subject areas as it would with any emerging field of study. It should be published and otherwise made known that this feedback is welcomed.

	Historically, research subjects and donors of LGBTQ-community collections may have desired anonymity in references and publications as a condition of participation in oral-histories, donations, and development of interpretation. This should be honored and explained to staff and visitors. †
	The museum should promote research and understanding of LGBTQ history and culture by making its collections available to scholars, students, and other museums.

† Though best practice keeps the identities of all parties related to an accession accessible and open to administrators which need them, that may put donors and other related parties in danger.

Consult any involved party about the necessary anonymity of their action, and (to the greatest degree possible given legal circumstances) help reduce the museum’s obligation to sharing that information openly.

Representation and Audience Impact are fundamental considerations for collecting queer. Any object based heavily in intangible histories must have considerable input and support from their communities of origin. Excellent representation with regards to its impact on audiences is crucial to building trust and making relationships with queer communities.

AAM Collection Stewardship Standard (§D.3)	<i>Welcoming Guidelines</i> Standard (§D.3.d)
The museum’s collections-related research is conducted according to appropriate scholarly standards.	Recognize that LGBTQ stories and voices are under-represented in museums . Recognize that content related to LGBTQ experiences have historically been absent from museums, even where pertinent, and that visible representations of LGBTQ content can profoundly, positively shape how LGBTQ visitors engage with their experience. †

† Queer collections programs and policies may not be possible in your organization due to historical actions or harm within your community. Holistic organizational change which accommodates fostering queer objects may not be possible either. Your livelihood and safety comes before implementing novel policies.

Strategic Planning documents and meetings must consider and plan for queer audiences to in turn support queer objects. Building rigorous documentation and policy which supports meaningful change in posterity is key to affecting donors, boards, community partners, and other stakeholders.

AAM Collection Stewardship Standard (§D.4)	<i>Welcoming Guidelines</i> Standard (§D.4.a)
The museum strategically plans for the use and development of its collections.	The museum may find it helpful to write, publish, and otherwise make accessible “onboarding” information describing the cultivation of collections and exhibits, the development of interpretive materials/activities, and expected/welcomed participation of LGBTQ donors and community representatives.
	Collection development guidelines and other curatorial policies should specifically address LGBTQ content and mission relevance.

Step Three: Applying New Methods

Knowing an object’s history allows collection stewards to understand what makes it “misaligned” with the normative, and how those qualities can be honored. The steward can consider queer objects within two general frameworks.²¹ As an “assemblage,” because the invisible, intersectional nature of queer sexuality makes its manifestation unique in every case (in other words, a queer object will be a cobbled-together unit of many different histories, queer and otherwise). And as

²¹ Chris Brickell and Judith Collard, eds. 2019. *Queer Objects*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press: 20-21.

part of a “network”, because queerness creates objects which act both on their own, and as a node for queer histories at large.²²

Evaluating and understanding a queer object means first understanding the bodies behind that object; what histories arrived with it; which histories did not; who holds the knowledge for this object; and the *relationship that the disoriented queer body has with the identity making process for this object*. Often this can be discerned through the object’s (possible) *actions*, which describe the relationship between object and body. Importantly, the queer object must then be contextualized alongside or within other queer objects to establish where it fits as a “node” in the queer network.

Consider the following example:

Imagine a baseball hat which a collection professional is considering for a collection of queer objects. What types of things would they ask to uncover its “queerness?”

- * Perhaps they ask if the donor is queer themselves, what the provenance of the object has, and if there were any previous queer owners.
- * Perhaps they ask how this personal item—this clothing—came to be removed from its purpose, its action.
- * Perhaps they consider if its removal was a choice by the owner—the body which first created its identity.
- * Perhaps they consider the new place it will take up, and the way that bodies its new space will be around it.
- * Perhaps they consult research, or a knowledge holder, which informs them of a history associated with queerness.

²² Brickell and Collard, eds. 2019. *Queer Objects*. 21.

Even then, the sum of these characteristics must be taken into consideration with how this object fits within space, and whether removing it from its context (yet) again will allow it to still act as a node for queer people where it is displayed, collected, and cared for.

The above example does not seek to outline a specific methodology, but instead highlight the constant interrogative cycle inherent to assessing queer objects. Unlike some normative objects, the value of an object's queerness must be understood through careful consideration with the objects and spaces which (will) surround it. Queer sexuality is an "invisible" trait, with often intangible histories, which can be iterated, explored, and at times, resuscitated in myriad ways through empathetic stewardship and environments.

Workshops or other modes of professional development can help build these skills for collections stewards. Protocols and modes used in these workshops should preferably focus on introducing novel concepts and questioning information and social systems. Below is an example structure of a workshop which can be freely adapted to most museums:²³

Protocols: The MacDonald "Cosmopolitan Protocol", in the format of a "WorldCafe".²⁴

Set-Up: Half-hour set up and take down, with an hour minimum allotted for implementation.

Materials: Multimedia presentation (slide deck), writing tools, large drafting papers, objects for consideration[†], accessibility tools as necessary.

Implementation

In multiple groups, each no larger than three members:

* Create table "stations" with a large paper and writing tools at the center, placing your object for consideration on the paper.

²³ Based off a workshop held at the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, a public nonprofit museum, in May 2023.

²⁴ Joseph P MacDonald. 2013. *The Power of Protocols: An Educator's Guide to Better Practice*. Third edition. Series on School Reform. New York: Teachers College Press: 104-106.

Juanita Brown and David Isaacs. 2005. *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations That Matter*. 1st ed. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

* Arrange tables in a way that makes traveling between them comfortable and explain the objectives of the protocol.

* Introduce the major topics and themes of queer collections, with a brief summary of current literature and relevant milestones. Additional information from the organizations which attendees hail from may also be helpful.

* Have attendees rotate between each station, giving them least five minutes per station, and provide questions to guide their thinking. Attendees are ultimately answering, “In what ways can this be considered a queer object?” Additional questions may include:

- > Is the donor is queer themselves (in either provenance or anecdote)?
- > Do we know how and why this object was removed from its original context or purpose?
- > Was that removal a choice?
- > What new place it will take up in our museum?
- > What way will bodies in our space use it?
- > Is there any knowledge holders who can answer our “I don’t know”s?

* Once all objects have been considered, bring the groups back together and recap. An exit evaluation or question may be useful to gauge effectiveness.

Note that these protocols can be substituted or changed depending on interest or mobility needs. A similar learning outcome can be reached by moving the papers and objects themselves, for example, rather than the attendees moving to different stations.

† The objects used can and should be a mixture of queer and non-queer objects. Queer objects, or representations of them, can be sourced from dedicated queer collections, from attendees, or from external sources. Alternatively, they can be created.

Regardless of how collections stewards engage with queer objects, bringing them to the conversation is the most important step. Queerness invites, and guarantees, disagreement; it allows

the standard model used by a museum to be safely counteracted and questioned. Queer objects promise intellectual rigor and institutional strength.

Of course, some areas, it may not be safe to outwardly use or consider queer objects for a museum collection. It may cause harm to the person using the object, or to the object itself. Stewards of queer objects must take great care to protect themselves and their collections. It may not always be possible for queer objects to enter a museum, but acknowledging and honoring queer objects can still queer lines of thinking, which may itself invite queer objects at a later date.



In Theory

Introduction

To understand queer objects, we must first consider what makes them up.

For starters, how do we even “make” objects? How do they affect space? What does that mean for our bodies? How does queerness change objects, space, and bodies?

The theory in this section provides a brief touchstone for each of these ideas, but is not designed to thoroughly explain them. The throughline for this section is Sarah Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology*, which provides detailed discussion on how objects are experienced in queer ways and by queer people. Ahmed introduces an array of lenses and authors, which are adapted in this section for this project and its scope.

Making space

Before we can tackle how queerness warps the normal, we must understand how “normal” objects, spaces, and bodies are made. How do bodies, objects, and spaces interact with each other?

In simplest terms, because people *occupy* the world. They exist physically (they “occupy space”); they form identities through work (they “occupy themselves”); they mark time (they “are occupied”).²⁵ More correctly, people are embodied, sensitive, and situated in their occupation.

- * Embodied, because the body creates and reinforces space through its actions and preferences for objects.
- * Sensitive, because in directing themselves around objects, bodies differentiate objects using their senses (*perception*).
- * Situated, because in forming perceptions which give the body position, bodies determine “what [they] do and how [they] inhabit space” (*orientations*).²⁶

²⁵ Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press: 44, 51.

²⁶ Edmund Husserl. 1969. *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. Collier Books. London: Collier-Macmillan. Cited in Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 27-28.

Orientation defines the characteristics of an object (i.e., type, kind, function), and the *actions* which those objects empower bodies to do. In other words, an object develops identity through perception, and bodies react to that identity through use and the direction of attention (i.e., orientation). Objects move bodies toward and away from them when their identities put the body into (op)position, therefore objects also define space.²⁷

Imagine entering a room with your back turned toward the center. As you walk backward through the doorjamb, you perceive the door, its frame, the walls, and the space you came from.

Standing in that entryway, you are oriented around the door: the “thing” you just acted upon. Turning around, however, you see the rest of the room, empty except for a baseball on the ground. In perceiving that baseball, you make agreements about its characteristics, and likely understand that bodies often throw baseballs. Perhaps you walk forward, pick up the ball, and toss it; perhaps you kick the ball; perhaps you leave the room because of it.

Either way, the baseball has reoriented you and defined your space.

Seeing objects

How then do bodies decide what they see?

Bodies *define* what they face toward and *imply* the parts unseen. Bodies identify an object synthetically, combining “background features” which do not sustain attention (what Edmund Husserl calls “co-perception”), with the part of an object the body actively views.²⁸ Unseen parts also imply unseen backgrounds (in time and in space). “Facing the background”—attempting to

²⁷ Husserl. 1969. *Ideas*. Cited in Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 28.

²⁸ Robert Sokolowski. 2000. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press: 20. Cited in Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 36.

Husserl. 1969. *Ideas*. Cited in Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 29.

actively view which parts are implied—uncovers how the object arrived in space, and how the body came to meet it likewise.²⁹ Viewing parts unseen can also uncover the histories which “brought it forth,” and the trajectory of the objects; where it has been and where it might go.

(Note that while perception changes how bodies *identify* objects, the item transformed into the object through perception does not change—the physical matter of the item persists.³⁰ This fact, however self-evident, underscores that the dynamic component of object-making is the body’s perspective: how the *body* contextualizes the characteristics of an object creates its identity.)

Imagine you have just seen the baseball again. When you view it, you see the side which faces you and the door.

Perhaps you see a white sphere punctuated with red. A memory—a previous perception—might remind you that many baseballs are made of dyed leather tied together by red laces. Perhaps it also reminds you that the laces tell your fingers where to rest on the ball, and that the smooth leather assists in throwing.

You pick up the ball, turning it over to an unseen side, and you see a scuff blackening the leather. Perhaps you imagine the ball was used before, in certain ways, before coming to rest here. How it was used factors in to how you will use this ball too.

Perceiving this baseball has revealed its character.

Feeling action

How do bodies know how to act upon objects?

²⁹ Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 38.

³⁰ Husserl. 1969. *Ideas*. Cited in Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 36.

When bodies perceive the characteristics of an object, the body may assume certain *actions*. Actions often shape (the relationships between) bodies and subjects because actions are generational and therefore historical.³¹ History shapes objects, and labor determines their value; they are formed out of labor, but they also “take the form” of that labor.³² History also determines which objects arrive and which do not. Most importantly, however, not all histories can be perceived on an object.

Actions *intimately* imply the object and the body. In other words, objects orient around bodies as bodies orient around objects and both become familiar to each other. However, some “objects... are made for some kinds of bodies more than others.”³³ Additionally, intimacy—familiarity—can place objects into “backgrounds,” even when actively viewed.³⁴



³¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. 1978. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Edited by Robert C. Tucker. Second edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company: 170. Cited in Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 41.

³² Marx and Engels. 1978. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. 170. Cited in Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 41.

³³ Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 51.

³⁴ Husserl. 1969. *Ideas*. Cited in Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 37.

Imagine turning over the baseball again.

The ball slots into your palm as your fingers wrap over the laces. Under the scuff you can feel a dent in the core of the ball.

Perhaps your intuition tells you that the baseball may be worth less now that it looks used.

Perhaps you then discard the ball, or you leave it where you found it.

Imagine instead that you take it with you and place it where you work. Over time, you might begin to view the baseball as decoration, or even clutter.

Perhaps you find an advertisement offering a reward for returning a lost baseball used in a local tournament. You may have watched this team play before, or know the players who used the ball, and give it an emotional value. You might begin to value the baseball differently, despite not even knowing whether the ball in the advertisement is the ball that you found.

Once again, the relationship between the ball and your body has affected your orientation toward it.

Consider also that this set of experiences cannot be possible unless your body *can* orient toward the ball. You cannot pick up the ball and perceive its physical character without limbs or prostheses. Without knowing its history, you cannot perceive its emotional or temporal character. Even using the ball for its intended purpose requires personal and cultural knowledge.

Orientations therefore put “some things but not others [into]... reach.”³⁵ More than that, repeating orientations over time means bodies *tend to* face some ways more than others. Also, in forming *tendencies*, the actions a body performs leads them to inhabit some spaces more than others.

³⁵ Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 56, 66.

Consider finally how you may have approached the room with the baseball to begin with, and that finding the ball was not happenstance.

Perhaps your body has access to buildings where lost items crop up more frequently; would finding this ball then be an annoyance?

Perhaps you search for items like the baseball in your day-to-day life as an occupation; would finding this ball then be serendipitous?

These bodily tendencies to exist in certain places more than others changes the potential and real relationships you have with the ball.

Being collective

In summary, bodies perceive objects and discern their qualities; bodies synthesize identities for objects based on information the body knows; objects carry histories visibly and invisibly; actions often define the relationship between objects and bodies; and the orientation of the body changes the objects and spaces it inhabits. While these tenets apply to the individual body, groups of bodies can affect (groups of) objects likewise. Collective bodies, as an emergent property of individuals, take on the same principles.

Groups of individuals inherit orientations from previous generations through *impressive* labor. That is, the body inherits how it *tends to be* in certain spaces (i.e., “is impressed upon”), as well as the “proximity of certain objects” (which can mean “values, [economic] capital, aspirations, projects, and styles”) from the collective work of previous generations. In inheriting orientations and tendencies, groups of individuals also inherit ways of inhabiting space.³⁶ Bodies need not be

³⁶A good example is space making in Tongan and Sāmoan communities. See Völkel, Svenja. 2010. “Spatial Descriptions.” In *Social Structure, Space and Possession in Tongan Culture and Language: An Ethnolinguistic Study*, 105–53. Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Company.; and Quintus, Seth, and Jeffrey T. Clark. 2016. “Space and Structure in Polynesia: Instantiated Spatial Logic in American Sāmoa.” *World Archaeology* 48 (3): 395–410.

physically near, either, to inherit orientations, with the advent of print and digital media.³⁷ Importantly, too, bodies do not get to choose the inheritances they receive.

Sarah Ahmed says it simply: "...inhabiting the family is about taking up a place already given. I slide into my seat [at the table] and take up this place."³⁸

Why, however, does Ahmed continue by stating: "I feel out of place in this place, but those feelings are pushed to one side?"

What makes Ahmed feel disoriented despite the orientations she has been given?

For Ahmed to feel out of place in the familiar and the inherited, something other than "coming in line" with the objects around her must occur: "[things] are 'in line' ... when they are aligned [with others]... when the lines of the tracing paper are aligned with the lines of paper that has been traced, then the lines of the tracing paper disappear [and] you can simply see one set..."

Despite inheriting a place on a "line," Ahmed feels outside of it. If the line is the *normative*—the inherited, historical tendencies which favor some bodies more than others—being "out-of-line" (misaligned, unaligned) means standing apart. In fact, considering that being in-line means the body and its orientations "disappear," being out-of-line means visible opposition, skewedness, and divergence. Ahmed and others call this condition "queer."

Knowing queer

But what does "queer" mean?

"Queerness" depends on the context in which it is used because the study of queerness is an interdisciplinary, intersectional practice.³⁹ Interdisciplinary, in that queerness encompasses an *approach* to subverting norms in work and livelihood which can apply to any field. Intersectional,

³⁷ Benedict R. O'G Anderson. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised and Extended edition. London: Verso. Cited in Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 119.

³⁸ Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 88.

³⁹ Bruce Henderson. 2019. *Queer Studies: Beyond Binaries*. New York, NY: Harrington Park Press: 3-5.

in that queer studies is based in fourth-wave American feminism and contemporary gender and sexuality studies. A collective effort by many authors, thinkers, revolutionaries, and activists—Angela Y. Davis, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, bell hooks, Michelle Wallace, and many others—coined “intersectionality” to describe and vindicate the specific forms of discrimination faced by women of color, especially Black women, in America.⁴⁰ Intersectional approaches explicitly depart from American white-middle-class (Third Wave) feminism, and act as the foundation for contemporary studies in gender, sexuality, and womanhood.⁴¹

If *normative* bodies define *normative* objects, which in turn create *normalized* spaces, tendencies, and inheritances, then *queer* bodies define *queer* objects and their descendant spaces, tendencies, and inheritances. Colonial-social constructs such as gender, class, sex(uality), and race, prefer some (white, heterosexual, cisgender, male, monied) bodies over others. Disappearing bodies into the colonial-social “line” places most of the world’s bodies outside of it, queering them. To understand “queer” in the context of objects, we can then refer to various models in Ahmed’s phenomenology which address sexuality as well as gender, race and racism, Orientalism, and migrancy.

Across social-colonial constructs, “queer is... a way of approaching [the objects that are] retreating:” not just in sexual orientation, but any orientation.⁴² “Queer” does not search for an answer to the colonial-social line, but instead asks how bodies will orient themselves in the moments they are made to be misaligned.

Misalignment

When bodies inhabit spaces, they acquire its “shape.” That is, they conform to the inheritances set out by the objects occupying it and labor which created them. The aligned body disappears and becomes extended by the space intended for it. The misaligned body, however, arrives and must work hard to acquire a new shape and conform itself to such a space.

⁴⁰ Angela Y. Davis and Cornel West. 2016. *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*. Edited by Frank Barat. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books: 18-20.

⁴¹ Davis and West. 2016. *Freedom*. 19-20.

⁴² Mandy Merck. 1993. *Perversions: Deviant Readings*. New York: Routledge: 2. Cited in Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 78.

Ahmed calls the tendency for bodies (and objects) to change themselves in the face of normative hegemony *straightening*, and the objects which support it *straightening devices*. Nothing simply “is” straight, for straightness is an act of *becoming* a thing. Mandy Merck calls the process of becoming the other, “perverse:” a disorientation contesting convention, be it sexuality or “orthodoxies in general.”⁴³ (Indeed just as with “queer,” the root words of “perverse” imply a “thorough turning” to or away from something—a significant deviation). Elsewhere too “queerness” is described as a “derailment,” or an act of “making the wrong turn.”⁴⁴ “Queer,” then, is the incapability and unwillingness to straighten as an act of becoming *some other thing*. Incapable, because normative hegemony *imposes* queerness onto bodies and creates dichotomies. Unwilling, because to a lesser degree, the body can also *choose* to reject normative hegemony as an individual social-political act.

Bodies have no choice but to be *made* queer.

Transforming bodies

So, what happens when normativity creates the queer body?

In general, normativity prescribes the relationships that bodies can have with objects, and therefore the actions they can take.

In terms of sexuality, the normative body is considered “straight” while the body that deviates is “queer.”⁴⁵ For “sexual orientation” is a by-product of normativity placing bodies in opposition to a “neutral” straightness. Normative tendencies reinforce the straightening of queer bodies and objects as inheritance. Queer bodies orient differently because normativity enforces the appropriateness of their actions, how they use objects, and how they use themselves to express desire. Since normativity prescribes straightness, queerness is not an “equal” other, and queer bodies face social consequences for expressing romanticism and sexuality, even through objects. Queer desires oppose the “normal,” and for that reason, being “queer is a ‘death threat’” to the

⁴³ Merck. 1993. *Perversions*. 2. Cited in Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 78.

⁴⁴ Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 76.

⁴⁵ Many other terms refer to queer sexualities. See Appendix A for more.

normative system.⁴⁶ A threat that normativity answers with harm—physical and psychological—to queer bodies and objects.

Sarah Ahmed suggests that heterosexuality never “comes into view,” but instead works more as the background to which sexual and romantic queerness is contrasted. Therefore, heterosexuality does not so much refer to a bodily orientation, as much as it describes what bodies orient *around* when they are placed into opposition to it. Normativity defines queerness as a turn away from heterosexuality, but heterosexuality is not a turn away from queerness. Being “straight” is a compulsive orientation.

Queer sexualities are therefore “failed orientations” which force the body to spend time and work to exist. As Ahmed suggests: “to inhabit a lesbian body... the act of tending toward other women has to be repeated, often in the face of hostility and discrimination, to gather such tendencies into a sustainable form...”⁴⁷

To orient as a queer body means “[putting] within reach... [what has] been made unreachable” by normativity. In *sustaining* itself, the queer body searches for spaces within spaces where the pull of orbiting the normative is weaker. These places where “others... share... points of deviation;” “where welcome shades fall and linger,” allow the body to arrive as-is.⁴⁸ Orienting toward spaces where queer bodies can exist creates and protects queer objects as they are made.

It is worth noting that bodies are not made queer only on the basis of sexuality. Ahmed notes that the racialized and/or Orientalized body exists on a dichotomy enforced and imposed by white-colonial normativity (which also overlaps and reinforces heterosexism). “White-colonial normativity” (“whiteness”), in this case, refers to the hegemonic culture born of the past and present effects of European colonization which place(d) European settlers and their descendants against non-European people and their descendants through genocide, systemic discrimination on the basis of class-race, and institutional disenfranchisement. White colonial normativity upholds

⁴⁶ Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 77.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 102.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 105-107.

itself by making bodies of color into “strange” instruments that make whiteness more “familiar” by contrast.

That is, whiteness identifies bodily “others” to make itself distinct: the “Orient,” for example, is not so much the “East” (as its root word defines it), as it is “not-Europe.”⁴⁹ Perception creates positionality, which then imposes emotional, temporal, and physical characteristics on the object viewed (and the body viewing); perception is *never* a casual or neutral act.

To suppose itself as a body with the power to make identity *unilaterally*, white-colonial normativity cannot treat other bodies as anything other than objects. Even non-European bodies filter their perceptions of “not-Europe” around whiteness on account of its hegemonic quality (lent by the inheritances it imposes on colonized spaces).⁵⁰ The desire to acquire only *parts* of “not-Europe” separates its identity from the bodies which define that space to begin with. The identity imposed by the body *in power* forces all perceptions from *any body* to orbit around it.

Orientalism underscores how whiteness imposes itself as a *force* without being a *thing*. Ahmed describes whiteness as an “economy;” bodies (are made to) circulate whiteness as currency, which affects the tendencies and identities of the bodies which circulate them. White-colonial normativity grows as an economy because it benefits the bodies which come in line with it, just as any orientation puts some things but not others within reach.

Most crucially, however, whiteness affects how non-white bodies identify *themselves*. “Reduced to things among things,” white-colonial normative powers stop bodies of color from asserting self-made identity on the space around them. Whiteness imposes *disorientation* on non-white bodies by forcing identity-making through the lens of whiteness. As Frantz Fanon says, “racism ensures that the black gaze returns to the black body, which is not a loving return, but rather follows the line of the hostile white gaze. The disorientation affected by racism diminishes capacities for action.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa. 2001. *Orientations: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press: 7. Cited in Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 114.

⁵⁰ Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 116, 120, 132.

⁵¹ Fanon. 1952. *Peau noire*. 111. Cited in Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 110-111.

Indeed, Fanon reflects that ““the elements”” which constitute his being were “provided for [him]... by the white man, who had woven [him] out of a thousand details, anecdotes, [and] stories’.”⁵²

Given the effects of whiteness, racialized and/or Orientalized bodies find ways to sustain themselves in the face of whiteness, just as bodies do with heterosexism. Audre Lorde explains that racialized bodies must regather by channeling their anger at white objectification: “in feeling angry about racism, and for how we have been diminished by it, we create new spaces—we expand the very space occupied by our bodies, as an expansion that involves political energy and collective work.”⁵³

While the hegemonic quality of white-colonial normativity can seem insurmountable, anger about forced orientation can itself force reorientation. Objects identified and used by non-white bodies then can become sites of resistance to normativity as microcosms—extensions—of this effect. Queer bodies—be they othered for sexuality, racialization, or any other un-normative characteristic—find ways to exist in space.

Putting it all together

In summary, white, colonial, normative collection techniques de- and re-contextualize objects removed from the bodies which first identified them. Sometimes normativity *extracts* these objects by giving bodies-in-power agency to steal and destroy objects from other bodies. Oftentimes bodies which acquire objects (which can be the “museum professional”) will also lay new identities over the object, complicating the interpretation of their history. Bodies perceiving an object will never understand the full breadth of its history without sharing knowledge or receiving inheritances; museum-type organizations often seek to possess these histories without engaging the bodies or spaces from which they come. To add insult to injury, these organizations will often prize bodies with perceptions far removed from the original bodies which created them, and place those prized bodies in positions of power which reinforce normative viewpoints and further skew

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Audre Lorde. 1985. *I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing across Sexualities*. First edition. Freedom Organizing Series. Latham, NY: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press: 145-153. Cited in Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 155.

the identity of the object. Cultural genocide undertaken by white colonial normativity comes in the form of (sometimes well-meaning) acquirers of knowledge which sanitize and destroy object histories and bodily orientations otherwise passed on through inheritance.

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Only by coming to terms with its history can professionals push the museum to address its “bedrock of harm.”⁵⁴ Better collections stewards understand and acknowledge that by virtue of their position they possess powers of identity-making they perhaps otherwise could not; they form relationships with people which traditionally or historically possess that power, and in doing so empower each other; they seek to understand the histories they cannot know and counter normative spaces so that queer bodies can not only sustain themselves, but flourish. Better collections stewards practice transparency and honesty with the objects, belongings, and specimens they care for. In doing so, they include their community in every piece of necessary procedural justice.⁵⁵

In becoming better stewards—in making better museums—museum professionals become better ancestors for the people who needed them to be, and for all those who come after. Art can become “emancipatory”; history can guide the present; and deviations can be treasured alongside the expectations they warp.⁵⁶ To change the museum means having the courage to change with the objects within it.

⁵⁴ Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Chris James Taylor, eds. 2021a. “Chapter 2: The Three-Body Problem of Museums.” In *The Inclusive Museum Leader*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield: 16-17.

⁵⁵ Catlin-Legutko and Taylor. “Chapter 16”. 157-159.

⁵⁶ Amalia Mesa-Bains. 1992. “Chapter 8: The Real Multiculturalism: A Struggle for Authority and Power.” In *Different Voices: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Framework for Change in the American Art Museum*. New York, N.Y.: Association of Art Museum Directors: 112–13.

Back Matter

Appendix A: Terminology for Queer Identities

There is an incredible breadth of terms which people use to describe sexuality, gender, and sex. Each topic below introduces discussion topics which serve to clarify and improve institutional language guidelines. Keep in mind, however, that the most appropriate language for a project is self-identified by the communities taking part in it.

Gender, Sex, and Sexuality

Gender-Sex

While people often interchange the terms “gender” and “sex” there are distinct differences. “Gender” is often understood as the expression of your social roles iterated through performance; it is a more mutable quality.⁵⁷ “Sex” is often understood as the set(s) of characteristics informed by chromosomal and genetic factors which determine bodily composition. Contemporary research acknowledges the differences between these two categories and also suggests that gender and sex may be indelibly linked and reciprocally influential.

The dynamics within sex and gender are important. Doctors, parents, and other social figures often assign gender roles based on the appearance of genitals at birth. This conflates sex and gender, and for many trans people, their identity contradicts the gender assigned to them at birth. Nevertheless, people find it useful to discuss the lived experiences (and often also the health implications) attached with the assigned gender-sex.

AMAB and AFAB

People identify with the terms “assigned male at birth” (AMAB) to describe being born with a penis and testicles (and assigned male), and “assigned female at birth” (AFAB) to describe being born with a vulva and ovaries (and assigned female).

⁵⁷ Ahmed. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology*. 58, 60.

Intersexuality

Intersex people are people born with multiple, or minimal, sets of sex characteristics informed by chromosomal and genetic factors, and fall outside of the sex binary. This can include physical characteristics, such as genitalia and other organs, as well as genetic factors, such as chromosomal duplication, all of which are sometimes known as intersex “variations” or “traits.”

Sexual orientation and sexuality

Sexuality refers to the intensity and orientation of someone’s sexual and/or emotional attraction to others. While sexuality is often described in terms of sex, it also includes gender as a correlated factor. There are many terms which describe specific sexualities.

Orientation refers to the gender-sex preference(s) of someone’s attraction (e.g., someone heterosexual is attracted to somebody “opposite” to their gender-sex). Intensity refers to the amount of sexual or emotional attraction someone has (e.g., someone asexual has a lowered or absent sexual-attractive intensity; someone aromantic has a lowered or absent emotional-attractive intensity).

How do they all work together?

Individual gender, sex, and sexualities are related but separate components of someone’s identity. One does not determine the other.

(2S)LGB(T)(Q)(IA)(+)

“Gay” and “Lesbian”

In the United States, the term “gay” has historically served as an umbrella term for any nonheterosexual person. While this sense is sometimes maintained in broad political speech (i.e., gay marriage), since the mid-20th century the connotation has shifted to imply specifically queer men. The terms “lesbian” (in the sense of women attracted to women) and “gay” (in the sense of a men attracted to men) have been used as a self-identifier since the 19th century.

“Homosexual”

“Homosexual” historically served as a blanket term for all queer people. However, the term has been used in legal and medical contexts to prosecute and condemn queer behavior. Most queer people reject this term as identification.

“Queer”

“Queer” has oscillated between being pejorative to neutral-positive since its creation. In the 19th century it carried solely a pejorative sense. It was reclaimed, mostly by men, in the early 20th century, before being supplanted by “gay” by the 1950s. The American queer liberation movement rejected “gay” as an assimilationist and conservative term, in favor of initialisms. “Queer” has since become more commonplace, especially amongst younger members of queer communities.

“GLB”

Initialisms were popularized in the early 1980s. The term “GLB” (“gay, lesbian, and bisexual”) was coined to include gay men and lesbian women, as well as bisexual people (in the sense of people attracted to multiple genders). Though now considered dated, its use is maintained in titles created at this time (e.g., Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAGs)).

“LGBT”

“LGBT” (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) became more commonplace than “GLB” by the late 1980s. In later decades, additional letters have been added to represent the terms queer (and sometimes “questioning” (individuals unsure of or testing their sexuality), intersex (individuals whose sex characteristics and bodily composition fall outside the sex binary), asexual and aromantic (individuals who feel varying degrees of sexual and/or romantic intensity below typicality), two-spirit (shortened to “2S”), and the addition of a “+” sign to indicate other unrepresented identities, often yielding “2SLGBTQIA+”.

“2SLGBTQIA+”

“2SLGBTQIA+” and its permutations are criticized by some for being too confusing, too atomizing, and for leaning too heavily into Western concepts of gender and sexuality. Some reject “LGBTQIA+” and its permutations as assimilationist and conservative (as with “gay” above), in favor of “queer and trans” and other sayings.

“2S”

“2S” is often added to contemporary initialisms (often “LGBTQIA+”) to include two-spirit people (Indigenous people with both traditional and contemporary gender and/or sexuality variant), yielding “2SLGBTQIA+”. Two-spirit is the literal English translation of the Ojibwe expression *niizh manidoowag* (“two spirits”), which the Third Native Americans/First Nations Gay and Lesbian Conference (1993) coined to replace racist language used by settler-colonial anthropologists.⁵⁸ The English two-spirit is often used to define Indigenous people within the settler-colonial gender-sexuality spectrum, but “two-spirit” identities lie outside and separate of the Western queer and trans spectra, though they may overlap for some individuals.⁵⁹ These identities cannot be expressed by non-Indigenous people. Indigenous languages often already supply specific terminology for two-spirit identities relevant to their communities. See Further Reading for more sources on two-spirit identities.

Pejorative Terminology

Vocabulary and language norms change constantly. Any project must engage in thorough and thoughtful research to determine language considerate to all communities involved. Exhaustive lists of such language are not possible, but some terms are widespread, and should be assumed.

⁵⁸ Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, eds. 1997b. “Introduction.” In *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 2-4.

⁵⁹ Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang. 1997a. “Chapter 4: Various Kinds of Two-Spirit People.”

Appendix B: Further Reading

Black Feminism and Contemporary Feminism

Davis, Angela Y. 1983. *Women Race & Class*. First Vintage books ed. New York: Vintage Books.

Moraga, Cherríe and Anzaldúa Gloria. 2015. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Fourth ed. Albany NY: SUNY Press.

hooks, bell. 2015. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. New ed. New York: Routledge.

hooks, bell. 2014. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist Thinking Black*. New ed. New York: Routledge.

Hull, Akasha, Gloria Patricia Bell-Scott, Barbara Smith, and Brittney C Cooper. 2015. *All the Women Are White All the Blacks Are Men but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. Second ed. New York City: Feminist Press at the City University of New York.

Wallace, Michele. 2015. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. London: Verso.

Two-Spiritedness and Indigiqueerness

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