What makes an object queer? Developing protocols for LGBTIQ+ collecting practices in regional GLAM institutions

This paper aims to address the question 'what makes an object queer' through the context of a regional museum's current exhibition about the LGBTI experience in the region. The research is a collaboration between the exhibition curator and a local researcher, and aims to produce a set of research-based protocols that have a direct impact on collection practices in regional areas.

The early twenty first century has seen an emerging body of knowledge looking at queer and LGBT memories as preserved in institutional and non-institutional collections (see for example Cvetkovich 2003; Kumbier 2014; Halberstam 2005). This project works alongside these theoretical approaches to build further understanding of the practices of collections that themselves often fall under the radar – regional libraries, museums and archives.

Preserving LGBT memories and histories should be an important part of work done by collecting institutions at state and national levels, but as Andrew Flinn notes, these state institutions 'overwhelmingly privilege the voices of those with power and influence in society', and that 'when these 'others' do appear in the archives, they rarely speak with their own voice, but rather appear as the objects of official interest and concern' (2010, n.p.).

There have been attempts to counter this; for example, in 2005 the Museum of Victoria, the State Library of Victoria and the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives undertook a 'Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay and Transgender Material Survey', which surveyed collections across Victoria for their LGBT content. The survey relied on a 'multi-tiered classification system' (Davison 2011, p.156) to identify the records. This system considered records by orientation, association and sensibility, and collection databases were trawled and records reclassified as appropriate.

This current paper presents a discussion of a research work-in-progress; the authors are undertaking a series of interviews with collection managers, curators, donors and audience members to build an understanding of working with queer objects in collections. This research will lead to the development of draft protocols, at the core of which will be the question 'what is a queer object'. Recognising objects as having a queer potentiality doesn't change their role in the museum, library or archive, rather it enhances their classification.

Works cited

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