

RESPONDING TO ACTIVISM

NEW COLLECTION, 'MUSEUMS, SEXUALITY,
AND GENDER ACTIVISM,' TAKES ANOTHER
LOOK AT GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE
MUSEUM

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Museums, Sexuality, and Gender Activism is the follow-up collection to the 2010 volume *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums: A Routledge Reader*, edited by Amy K. Levin. In the new book, Joshua Adair¹ joins Levin as co-editor, and together they aim to capture developments in museum practice, case studies, and research that have emerged in the past decade, this time with an added emphasis on activism. *Museums, Sexuality, and Gender Activism* is part of Routledge's Museum Meanings series edited by Richard Sandell and Christina Kreps. The series responds to recent significant shifts in museological practice and uses interdisciplinary investigations to explore the changing role of museums. The authors of the chapters in this collection, ranging from the emerging to the established, draw on a diverse set of perspectives including theoretical, practical, and critical, and consider themes of inclusion, representation, and co-production in art and history museums.

With such a broad subject, the book does cover a lot of ground, and it comes together cohesively thanks to a strong

editorial voice. Chapters frequently reference other chapters, helping build connections across case studies and concepts. Connections between queer activism and feminist activism, however, are weak and miss opportunities to recognize the lineage of gender analysis that provides the foundation for our understanding of sexuality studies and queer activism. The case studies are valuable, but as a collection, the book misses the mark when it comes to trans and queer themes and expertise.

The collection does meet its goal of grappling with contemporary issues and activism and three chapters emerge as indicators of that success. Since the publishing of the volume's predecessor, the #MuseumsAreNotNeutral campaign² led by LaTanya Autry and Mike Murawski has had a tremendous impact on the field, urging museum practitioners to consider their roles in upholding white supremacy. Reflective of the impact of this campaign, as well as international conversations driven by civil rights movements like Black Lives Matter, these three chapters focus on how museums interpret and interact with prisons, coloniality, and slavery. One particularly powerful chapter is "Empty, Displaced, Assimilated: Spatial Politics of Gender in Ankara Ulucanlar Prison Museum" by Özge Kelekçi and Meral Akbaş, which details the erasure of violence against women inmates at a Turkish prison that is now a museum. The authors' critique of the prison museum is uniquely poignant because of the authors' intimate experience with the site: one was a political prisoner in Ulucanlar and the other witnessed massacres and resistance efforts there. Now PhD students at Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Kelekçi and Akbaş explain how the recently museum-ified prison artificially empties and decontextualizes the place, smoothing over

and omitting the gendered violence the authors witnessed firsthand.

In “‘A Battlefield All Their Own’: Selling Women’s Fiction as Fact at Plantation Museums,” Joshua Adair, associate professor of English at Murray State University, analyzes the problematic relationship between contemporary Christian romance novels and the plantations on which they are set. Specifically, Adair looks at one author’s bibliography of such novels, written for white heterosexual women and set during the Civil War. The popularity of the novels has driven attendance to the plantations, which now operate as museums. In recent years, Black Lives Matter protests have demanded a national reckoning with Confederate nostalgia, spurring public debate over the role of museums in housing and interpreting Confederate symbols and memorials.³ Plantation museums have largely welcomed the increase in ticket sales and wedding venue rentals due to the popularity of the novels, despite their historical inaccuracies. Adair notes the dangerous tropes on which the relationships between Christian romance novels and plantation museums hinge, including: antebellum nostalgia, “lost cause,” and “states’ rights” narratives, the master who treats slaves “like family,” patriarchal romance, and the innocence of white women.

In “Kent Monkman’s Shame and Prejudice: Artist Curation as Queer Decolonial Museum Practice,” Ann Cvetkovich, Director of Women’s and Gender Studies at Carleton University in Ottawa, describes the curatorial interventions of Cree artist Kent Monkman. The artist installs his paintings and sculptures alongside museum objects to insert indigenous narratives into the colonial space of the museum. Thanks to activist movements like *Decolonize This Place*,⁴ calls for museums to address their

colonial legacies have gained traction in some museum spheres. Monkman's approach specifically responds to the ways institutions perpetuate colonial attitudes and concepts regarding gender and sexuality. Identifying as queer, cisgender, and two-spirit, Monkman speaks through Miss Chief Eagle Testickle (a play on the words "mischief" and "egotistical"), his high-heel wearing alter-ego, a trickster character who shape-shifts and time-travels through the historical scenes Monkman recreates in his paintings as he narrates the exhibition catalog. Through Miss Chief, Monkman uses humor and eroticism to address the painful history of colonialism and genocide of indigenous people in Canada. A troubling oversight in this chapter, however, is any mention of the criticism of the artist's relationships with institutions and themes of sexual violence in his work. Two-spirit art historian and curator Regan de Loggans (Mississippi Choctaw/ Ki'Che Maya) describes Monkman as perpetuating the patriarchal privilege he benefits from and using representation and multiculturalism posed as reparations in such a way that "absolves institutions of their participation in the system of colonialism, and continues the erasure of genocide and its legacy by offering a mythology of shared pain and struggle with settlers."⁵ Because of the unique cultural trauma experienced by Indigenous women, trans, and two-spirit people through sexual assault and colonial violence, they are better positioned to critique Monkman's work, even more than a scholar like Cvetovich who has written extensively about queer trauma.

The editors do address the gaps in author expertise and experience and make mention of the notion of emotional labor and the importance of compensating contributors for co-production efforts. Under current hierarchical struc-

tures in museums that reify heteronormative patterns, when marginalized people are invited to participate in their own “inclusion,” sometimes by reliving their own trauma or collaborating with an institution that has wronged them,⁶ there must be some incentive for their participation or attempt at reciprocity. Levin talks about how this played out in the creation of the book itself. In the introduction, she points to the absence of Black women from the list of contributors to the collection, noting that would-be contributors had requested to be paid for their work. The editors could have illuminated the breadth of representation the book does include had they asked authors to express their own positionality (race, sexuality, gender, disability status, etc.) in their chapters. Another significant shortcoming of the book is the lack of attention to trans scholarship and trans experience in the museum space. Departing from the more scholarly articles of the first four sections, the last section about trans content in museums relies heavily on interviews with trans people who do not work in the museum field. Levin et. al. also demonstrate a lack of fluency in basic trans terminology, in one instance describing a hypothetical trans man binding his chest as a “woman in transition.”⁷ Two authors’ remarks describing queer sex acts as “uncomfortable to watch”⁸ and “abhorrent”⁹ betray a discomfort with the subject matter. At the same time, some chapters casually reference queer scholarship, suggesting an assumption of the reader’s familiarity with queer theory. This tension makes me wonder who the editors imagine their readers to be and who this assumption neglects.

In a discipline that continues to harbor so much shame and fear around telling the stories of queer people and their histories, this book is an important contribution—but it

should not be the only book of its kind on the museum professional's bookshelf. *Museums, Sexuality, and Gender Activism* will be particularly useful to anyone in curatorial or collections positions at an art or history museum who are looking for practitioners' accounts, interesting case studies, and critiques of exhibition projects that deal with gender or sexuality. The gaps in author experience and expertise in this collection reveal opportunities for future contributions. As did its forebear *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums: A Routledge Reader*, I am confident this book will provoke and inspire many important publications to come.