"Where is Queer?" *Museums and Social Issues*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Spring 2008). 156 p. ISSN 1559-6893.

"Can we? Should we?" These are the questions General Editor Kris Morrissey asks in her introduction to this special issue of *Museums and Social Issues*. Morrissey is queasy about the word "queer," a word that, for many, signifies a particular insult, well beyond discretion and decency. But there it is in the title: Where is queer?

Queer seeks to replace the alphabet soup that emerged over the last half century: from the claiming of "gay" in the 1960s to the addition of lesbian, then bisexual, then transgendered, then queer (or questioning, depending who you ask), resulting in the unpronounceable GLBTQ or LGBTQQ or LGBTQ or …

Queer. Once a hate-fueled slur, now a reclaimed label worn with pride. John Fraser and Joe E. Heimlich, co-editors of the special issue, ask "Where

is queer?" They also address fundamentally related questions including "What is queer?" and, perhaps most importantly for archive and museum professionals, "Why does queer matter?"

Through ten essays (two of which address archival collecting) and three exhibition reviews, this strong and diverse collection offers a range of practical and theoretical answers to these questions. At a most basic level, queer matters because queer people are part of society, dispersed throughout society, and therefore publicly funded institutions, with a mandate to serve all of society, should serve queers as diligently as any other minority population. Several authors frame their essays in this fashion, arguing that the inclusion of queer themes in collecting and exhibitions is necessary for archives and museums to become "more democratic, compassionate, just, and equitable institutions" (p. 21). It is not merely assumed but demonstrated that queer themes are under-represented in collections and exhibitions. In a geographic study of the incidence and subject content of queer-themed exhibitions throughout Australia, Andrew Gorman-Murray uses comparative statistical analysis of queer-themed exhibitions and census data to lay bare the disjuncture between the population of Australia, the size of its self-identifying, same-sex attracted population, and the low incidence of queer-themed museum exhibitions.

Another piece, by Joe E. Heimlich and Judy Koke, considers how the lack of attention to queers may hurt membership and subscription rates. The authors explore why queers make up a proportionate number of visitors to cultural institutions but are below average in the purchase of memberships and subscriptions. Their investigation, limited to a pilot study of voluntary participants from an American alumni association, suggests that queers are no different from the straight population: "… people become members when they feel the organization has great value in their life and their community" (p. 102). One of a dozen issues raised in the article reveals that same sex couples felt they could not express affection, or simply demonstrate their relationship, at cultural institutions and events, whether by holding hands, physical contact, or kissing; in other words, cultural institutions have failed to create a context in which queers feel comfortable. This fact is quite apart from shortcomings in programming or collections, and speaks to a failure to include queer couples in advertising and promotional materials, a failure to build alliances with queer organizations, and a failure to reach out to queer visitors to provide the kind of experience that would inspire them to become members.

Queer-sensitive programming and collections are important pieces of this puzzle. This does not mean that archives must endlessly produce "Famous Lesbians"-type exhibits, or exhibits that focus on flamboyant behaviour such as dressing in drag – far from it. All agree that outing or reclaiming queers from the past is a necessary step in dismantling the collective closet, and that there is nothing wrong with the occasional exhibit on gay Mardi Gras.

However, participants did not support the kind of simplistic approach that one contributor pillories as "roll up, roll up and see some queers!" (p. 48). Several contributors question the value of such programming, especially when presented in isolation from more comprehensive views of queer life. Paul Gabriel, formerly Exhibits Director of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society of San Francisco, goes further, arguing that one-dimensional programming contributes to the negative associations that he calls "queer junk." The result, paradoxically, is either a hyper-sexualized queerness that celebrates "sex! Pleasurable, kinky, taboo sex!" (p. 62), or a desexualized queerness in which queers are objects of pity, as in simplistic programming on HIV/AIDS, or entertainment, as in simplistic programming on drag or queer Mardi Gras.

So what kind of programming and collections are appropriate? Several contributors maintain that special programming, no matter how nuanced and sensitive, cannot address a problem that is rooted in collections and permanent exhibits. Two of the ten essays address archival collecting specifically. In "Queer Collections Appear," Anne W. Clark and Geoffrey B. Wexler examine the efforts of the Oregon Historical Society to document as many same-sex marriages as possible following the decision of Multnomah County to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples in 2004. This decision looks prescient, especially since a subsequent ballot initiative amended the state constitution to define marriage as the exclusive right of heterosexual couples. The Wedding Album Project has become an important means of documenting an all-too brief moment in Oregon's history. Stacia Kuceyeski's article on "The Gay Ohio History Initiative as a Model for Collecting Institutions" outlines some of the challenges of creating appropriate queer collections, and suggests that one way for archives to move forward is to create a board of representatives from the queer community to guide collecting and programming.

Current collecting initiatives, then, offer one means of redressing the under-representation of queer people and themes in the permanent collections of archives and museums. But several contributors suggest that with diligence and imagination it is possible to identify queer aspects of existing collections. At a most basic level it takes only the acknowledgement that same-sex attraction has always existed, and therefore is likely documented in the existing collections. Stuart Frost's piece on "Secret Museums" treats the fascinating history of the sequestering of overtly sexual artifacts in major collections into so-called secret museums within the institution. These secret museums, which often included representations of straight as well as queer sex, existed from the nineteenth century up to the 1950s and usually required that patrons demonstrate a research need to gain access. Upon the dispersal of the secret museum, many institutions simply placed these artifacts into storage, or included them in their permanent exhibits while obscuring their sexual associations. Integrating such objects into ongoing exhibits, frankly addressing

their sexual content, would help uncover the history of sexuality. Similarly, Jenny Sayre Ramberg took her "queer eye" to the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia to review the permanent exhibit. She found several missed opportunities to add known queer context to events and people highlighted at the Center.

It is, moreover, possible to build an archaeology of queerness by teasing out the queer associations of seemingly "normal" artifacts and documents. In "Theorizing the Queer Museum," Robert Mills discusses the curatorial method behind "The Gay Museum," an exhibit that ran at the Western Australian Museum in Perth. Rather than combing the museum's holdings for "objective" evidence of queer lives, the curator identified queer contexts for seemingly "normal" objects and famous artifacts. A 1950s Punch-and-Judy police puppet is juxtaposed with reminiscences of queer life and police persecution of the same era. A fragment from a 1727 shipwreck is given a new context by documents stating that two survivors were subsequently found "committing the abominable and god-forsaken deeds of Sodom and Gomorrah" (p. 49).

I came away from this volume convinced that the time to address the queer void in archives and museums is now, using the tools and collections we already possess, even as we build more broadly representative collections for the future. Certainly Canadian archives could start by identifying and making known existing holdings that contribute to queer history. "Out There," an on-line project sponsored by the London Metropolitan Archives and The National Archives (UK), offers one model for bringing cohesion to discrete and scattered collections through a Web portal.[1] Archives also need to get serious about welcoming and engaging with queer visitors and the queer populations whose stories are too often excluded from our exhibitions and holdings. Formal links with queer associations, queer-positive programming, and a review of permanent exhibits to identify instances of the silencing of queer stories are good starting points, as is a comprehensive policy review to ensure queer-friendly policies, such as membership policies that explicitly extend membership benefits to same-sex families.

The benefits of a serious engagement with queer themes and people are multiple. Obviously, social justice calls out for it. Equally, it is part of "the reinvention of the museum [or archives] as a publicly responsible and responsive institution" (p. 16). This, really, is another way to say that addressing the queer void will help archives remain a relevant and vital part of Canadian society.

Greg Bak
Library and Archives Canada

1 *Out There: Gay and Lesbian Archive Links Online* (London, UK), http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/partnerprojects/outthere/default.htm. (accessed on 8 September 2009).