



We the Museum

Episode 12

Transgender Museum Studies (with Amelia Smith)

EPISODE DESCRIPTION

Are museums welcoming spaces for transgender visitors and museum workers? Are academics in museum studies building out the theory needed for meaningful trans inclusion in museums? In this episode, we're looking at how we in the museum field can support our transgender colleagues and community members, from museum studies classrooms to visitor bathrooms. My guest is Amelia Smith, a transgender museum professional writing and thinking at the intersection of museum studies and transgender studies.

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

Hannah Hethmon (Narration): *Welcome back to We the Museum: a podcast for museum workers who want to form a more perfect institution.*

I'm your host, Hannah Hethmon, Owner and Executive Producer at Better Lemon Creative Audio, where I make podcasts for museums, history organizations, and other cultural nonprofits.

In this episode, we're looking at ways we in the museum field can support our transgender colleagues and community members, from museum studies classrooms to visitor washrooms.

The Williams Institute estimates that 1.6 million adults and youth in the US alone identify as transgender. Those 1.6 million people are in the communities we serve. They are our friends, family, colleagues, and neighbors, and they are increasingly under attack.

Lawmakers in the US and other countries are passing bill to limit their rights, pundits debate their very existence, and hateful rhetoric is manifesting as physical violence and hate crimes.

In the museum field, there may not be explicit hate and oppression coming from institutions, but are we doing enough to counter the negativity, to replace it with active inclusion and care; are we using our spaces to validate trans lives and experiences? Are museum welcoming spaces for trans visitors and trans museum workers?

I'll just say it: I don't think we as a field are doing enough here.

My guest on this episode is Amelia Smith, a Canadian museum professional who has been thinking and writing at the intersection of museum studies and transgender studies. Amelia and I had a great conversation about this intersection, and how the field can better integrate transgender lives and theory into everyday practice.

Before we get started, I want to shout out our show sponsor, Landslide Creative. This podcast would not be happening without their support. Landslide Creative provides custom website design and development for museums who want to increase their engagement and connect with their visitors, donors, and volunteers. With a custom website designed for the unique needs of your museum, you can stop fighting with your website and focus on growing your impact. Head over to LandslideCreative.com to learn more.

Alright, let's get into the episode:

Amelia Smith: So my name is Amelia Smith. I am a transgender museum professional. For the past few years, I have been exploring ways to talk about and think about transgender issues within museums, a lot of the theoretical side of things. And I often do this on my website, notyouraveragecistory.com.

Hannah Hethmon: And of course, Not Your Average Cistory winning the all-time award for punniest blog title.

Amelia Smith: It's a great one

Hannah Hethmon: So let's start off with the big question. What does it mean to view museums through a transgender lens, and why is that important?

Amelia Smith: Viewing museums through a transgender lens is how I look at applying transgender topics to museums and to transgender history. When it comes to talking about transgender history, a lot of times the refrain that you will get back is that, well, how do you know? How are you so certain that such-and-such person was trans and therefore it is worth doing this. And so by talking about it with a transgender lens, you can focus more so on transgender experiences rather than specifically transgender identities. It lets you get around that complicated question of, well, how do you know? Because that itself carries a ton of baggage of what sources we consider to be valid and what we consider to be proof.

Hannah Hethmon: So, you know, sometimes it seems like part of the hangup for the museum field is that even when we have, so-called good intentions and wanna support our trans colleagues and community members, many people just don't have the knowledge and the nuance to contribute meaningfully. So they're often starting with the wrong questions. What questions do you wish? museum people, museum studies people were asking about transgender representation, inclusion, and experience. Like what should people be asking when they start exploring and researching?

Amelia Smith: Well, I think a big, big one is who are you trying to reach? Who is the audience that you're trying to speak to when you are doing these exhibitions, these programs on transgender topics? I find that a lot of times it is not actually aimed at a transgender audience. It is a cisgender audience that you're trying to translate. And I find that that can be very limiting and very disappointing as a transgender person to see my experience is not reflected in a voice that is trying to speak to me.

Queer people of all stripes are starving for visibility, starving for representation. All you have to do is look at any Netflix show that runs for three seasons and just has like a queer kiss or queer subtext to see that queer people want this sort of thing. They want to be seen. And so when you design an exhibit, design a program about trans people, your first thought should be, are trans people getting anything out of this? I think that by asking that question at the very start, it has a number of effects. For example, if you're targeting transgender audiences, you're not going to allow any sorts of conversations about "are transgender identities valid?" Because you're essentially saying to your audience, there's debate as to whether you exist.

So I think that it's just so important to actually speak to that audience because when you do that and when you have faith that cisgender visitors are going to follow along, that it will create a better conversation. It will create a better story, a better program just in the long run.

Hannah Hethmon: Yeah. So we'll come back to audience and interpretation and exhibitions shortly, but you talk about two things: museum studies and then the actual museum spaces. So let's let's start with museum studies, the academic side, because that's where a lot of people come into the field, that's where they're carrying their ideas and all the best practices and learning that they're going to then apply. So you've noted in your work that when it comes to museum studies, things are being written “about, not by” transgender people in this academic space. So can you talk more about that? Like, where are we now in the museum studies field? And where should we be?

Amelia Smith: Certainly. So I think that we're at a very interesting time for transgender topics in museums. Because you have a lot of stuff coming out now, specifically out of the UK. There's a lot being written by trans people in the UK and in Europe, I believe. But at the same time, you have what's getting published in a lot of places, in a lot of books that is outdated or ill-informed or just not quite right. The example that I like to give comes from *Museums, Sexuality, and Gender Activism*, which only came out in 2020. So just three years ago in it, in one article in the book, which is one of the few—this is one of the few books that actually attempts to discuss transgender issues—but in it, one article provides a definition of trans people as “For the purposes of this article transgender individuals are males who (wish to) present themselves as females, and females who (wish to) present themselves as males.”

Hannah Hethmon: Not good.

Amelia Smith: Not good. Not good at all. I think that is so indicative of where we find ourselves, that these definitions get published very recently, define a trans person as not the gender that they are, but just “wishing to be.”

There are articles being published in journals about transgender museum topics. But they're not coming out in museum journals. They're instead coming out in the transgender studies quarterly, which I think is just such a disappointment, such an indictment of the field that these very valuable conversations are not being had in our spheres, but instead outside of it. So I think we really need to take a moment and reflect on why it is that these conversations are being done elsewhere.

Hannah Hethmon: Yeah, and we're losing out on so much in our field. You can imagine if that were the case with everything, that all the interesting conversations about race and history and museum interpretation were only happening in journals specifically addressing the history of race, and then we'd be losing out on that conversation. Or even, you know, feminism, to be really, really basic, you know, if museums couldn't discuss feminist representation in museums, that only happened in feminist journals.

Amelia Smith: Exactly, it ends up siloing it and limiting the feel as a whole because people aren't going to think to go to [Trans Studies Quarterly] in order to find articles like this. Because there are some fascinating articles. There's a whole edition of TSQ from a number of years ago on archives and archiving—

Hannah Hethmon: Hmm, wow.

Amelia Smith: —that could be used for collections as well.

Hannah Hethmon: Yeah, of course.

Amelia Smith: But how many in the field know this? How many in the field are going out and looking for that?

Hannah Hethmon: Yeah, it doesn't really come up when you're looking. I was doing some searching for resources to prepare for this podcast. And there's not much out there that's kind of available in an initial search. What needs to be done to make it so that these people who are writing these great articles are trying to publish them and getting them published in museum journals, in museum spaces, they're being talked about in museum classrooms, and how can we encourage and promote and facilitate more dialogue among professionals—transgender and cisgender—so that more of these articles are being written as well?

Amelia Smith: So it's a really complicated question of how do you respond to it? How do you actually do better? Because I think it's something that's institutional. It's something that needs to change higher up in the journals themselves. For my part, this is why I have the annotated bibliography, the reading list on my website, because I know how hard it is to find these things, how to just find out that they exist. And so by putting it out there, by just having something that says, here's what is out there, here's what this article says and how I find it useful, just having that as a resource to point towards other materials, I think, is invaluable.

As for actually getting things to change, I don't know. Because I think it's just such a big, big question. We need to really think hard on it in terms of what we're submitting to journals and how the journals are operating, what is expected of articles to go through.

Hannah Hethmon: *We'll be right back to my conversation with Amelia Smith, but first it's time for a digital minute with Amanda Dyer, Creative Director at Landslide Creative.*

[Digital minute]

Hannah Hethmon:

Hannah Hethmon: What do you wish people were talking about? What subjects do you wish people were exploring at this intersection of transgender studies and museum studies? What do you want to read about?

Amelia Smith: I just want to read what people think. I want to read how people apply trans feminism to the museum. I want to read how the systems that are in play in museums impact transgender audiences, the ways that transgender people might navigate institutions. Or just how transgender people are made visible, how we can go about “transing” a collection or “transing” displays, telling these vibrant, vibrant stories, and doing that from a very museum perspective. Looking at how do we reach an audience, how do we interpret this history while also keeping true with the history that we have, the history that we know, while balancing that with a transgender audience, with audiences that will want to see this.

Hannah Hethmon: Yeah, I mean it sounds like the published conversation about this is just such, so new and so small that anything and everything—the need is just “more.” We need more people writing about this, more people who are writing about this getting published, more people talking about this, and the people who are talking, we need to publish them.

Amelia Smith: And I think we're at the start where we're seeing new voices come in. There's been a number of dissertations, a number of PhDs coming out of the UK, where people are exploring transgender issues in museums. But I have not yet seen it really cross over into practice. The American Alliance of Museums transgender storytelling document doesn't really engage with a whole lot of transgender museum publications beyond I think a couple of Margaret Middleton articles. So seeing the ways that we can really bridge that gap I think is so important.

Hannah Hethmon: Yeah, interesting to note that even American Alliance Museum's publishing on this, I think they had a guide to transgender interpretation, which is great. But they're not drawing from those sources that you're talking about that already exist out there elsewhere in the museum field. They're kind of starting from scratch in the museum field where there is nothing written, but they could be going outside the field to draw on those things and bring those into the field and help the museum field connect with the people writing about the things that we need to know about that are outside the field.

Amelia Smith: It needs to be a whole lot more intersectional.

Hannah Hethmon: Mm, yeah. So on that note, let's shift back to museum spaces themselves and everyone working in them. Let's talk about how transgender museum workers can feel included and feel welcome and feel able to share their perspectives in spaces. You know, we have trans museum professionals. How can we make sure that they are able to contribute fully to this conversation?

Amelia Smith: Yeah, I think that there's a lot that can be done institutionally. One of the big things, I think, is just signs. Not physical signs, but metaphorical ones that suggest that the institution is accepting, that the institution is welcoming, having well-thought-out non-binary and genderless washrooms, ensuring that front of staff are not gendering visitors, supporting and funding healthcare initiatives because transitioning is expensive, and being able to get the time off that you need in order to get surgeries or just to go to doctor's appointments and get blood work drawn—these are also very important to trans lives. Having things like pronouns available, having things like introducing oneself with their pronouns, and just creating this atmosphere in which it is *expected* that some people might be outside the binary or outside cisgender norms, and making that known, having plans in place in case someone comes out.

I know that The American Alliance of Museums has documents on coming out in the workplace that are very good and very useful. It's a great guide in terms of how to actually do that. And I think that having these on hand, having the materials ready to support... audiences and to support employees is absolutely necessary. And making the museum's voice heard on the subject. We're going through a lot right now as transgender people. And it is shocking how few institutions are actually speaking out about the current anti-trans [discourse]. Especially considering so many are considered to be family institutions seeking to attract families. But there's so little actual voices saying, we support the trans families that come.

Hannah Hethmon: Yeah. I mean, it sounds like so much of it's about—this is just true across the board—that people can't do great work in museum spaces unless they are able to thrive in their

lives generally. And so if you want to have transgender museum professionals doing great work, they need to be supported at work, both in the specific ways that are needed, but also generally, like we all need health care, but specifically trans people. are needing that healthcare, that support, so they don't have to go to other fields. They don't have to leave cultural work, non-profit work in order to thrive in their personal lives as well. If we foster that environment where people can thrive in our field, then we will have people having the space and time to write and share their insights and knowledge.

Amelia Smith: Exactly, exactly. Supporting the full employee. And not just, not just cynically, but unconditionally.

Hannah Hethmon: Yeah, and then I just want to highlight the two other things you said. You know, assuming that people in your workplace will be trans, will be non-binary, will be outside the gender binary, gender norms, not just reacting—even if positively—when that happens. That kind of assumption that, oh, like no one here is like that. You've got to do it the other way around. So no one has to be the first person. in their space.

And then also that outward-facing museum work. Museums don't have a good track record of speaking up for any issue, but they need to, and they need to do that for their workers and also for their community members who are transgender, who have transgender kids, who have transgender neighbors, and family members. And why would you want to go to a space where they can't bother to even put out a statement in support of your lives and existence.

Amelia Smith: Transgender people are part of the community that we so often seek to represent. And as such, we should be there for them, to support them, especially right now when so much is going on.

Hannah Hethmon: And I guess, again, as with so many issues like in the museum, you know, it's about creating a space where people can come and be visible. And that visibility then has great repercussions, you know, for the rest of society, for people being seen, seeing people like them, for other people seeing people that are not like them and seeing that they are just humans and seeing those commonalities. So within our exhibitions, within our workplaces, we need to start with a place like, this is a place where you can be seen and where you can speak out and where you can talk about your life, even just in a normal day-to-day way, not just an activist way.

Amelia Smith: Mm-hmm. And not just during not just during June.

Hannah Hethmon: Right, not just during June, exactly. You can talk about your life in July and August and even November. And we can talk about these lives during Black History Month because these are obviously not separate issues. We talk about Black trans people, about Indigenous trans people, about all these different experiences all year, intersecting with all the other amazing parts of humanity and identity that we should be talking about.

Amelia Smith: Exactly.

Hannah Hethmon: So do you have any examples that you can share of museums doing a good job? You know, we've been pointing out some of our shortcomings and flaws, but is anyone out there doing good work that we can look at as a model?

Amelia Smith: So one of my favorite exhibits that I like to point to comes out of the UK. And it was called the Museum of Transology. What it was was a series of objects donated by trans people to a trans curator, E. J. Scott, and included with these objects was a small little write-up. On a handmade, a small little write-up on an archival tag, just sort of explaining what that object meant to them. And I think it is such a fascinating exhibition. It centers trans voices in a way that really tells trans stories. And it's such an emotional way.

I think my favorite object that I've seen was a pair of swimming goggles. Just like a normal everyday pair of swimming goggles. But the story connected to this was "the first pair that I bought after getting top surgery, because I could finally go swimming again." It just speaks to a level of euphoria, a level of happiness with one's body, a level of trans joy that I don't think gets seen too often.

And I just, I love that. I love that whole idea of just centering the trans voices through trans objects and seeing what stories you can tell like that.

Hannah Hethmon: Yeah, and letting the expertise of the transgender curator arrange those as well, so that first person, that experience and authenticity carries through to the presentation, not just the collection.

Amelia Smith: And just the ability for trans people to curate ourselves, for us to curate our stories on both an individual and on a community level to tell the parts of our stories that we want to be told, rather than being fit into these boxes of what's kind of expected of us.

Hannah Hethmon: Yeah, I guess that's the thing about museums. You don't need to have all the expertise in-house for every single community, but you need to be platforms where you invite

people in to tell their stories in a way that they feel comfortable and have that feel like they have authority, not just like that service level solicitation of an object or inclusion, but to really make the museum space available as a platform for community members to... share their stories in authentic ways.

Amelia Smith: Exactly, it needs to be collaborative.

Hannah Hethmon: Yeah. And I think it's silly that it needs to be said, but that collaborative model we're applying, we need to apply that to the transgender community. So I just to put that out there in case anyone hasn't thought of that. We have to do that too. So really extending that awareness that I think a lot of people have of collaborative models and of community inclusion, this community needs to be included.

Amelia Smith: And included from the very start, not just as a rubber stamp towards the end to say, we're not offending anybody by doing this.

Hannah Hethmon: Yeah. And you also had an example from the Royal, from Ontario, right?

Amelia Smith: Yes, another one that I've read about and I frequently reference comes from the Royal Ontario Museum from, I want to say like 2016, 2015, around then. It was a series of Japanese, I think Edo-era prints. The exhibition was called *A Third Gender*, and it was about a gendered expression that was common in a lot of these prints from this era where young men would be often presented with a little patch in their head, in their hair, to symbolize it and they would be made the subject of sexual advances by both men and women. And in the article for TSQ, the curator, Asato Ikeda, discusses the processes in which they went through as an institution to speak with the transgender community, speak with the LGBTQ community, took advice of like not gendering those depicted. and also attempted institutional change, because as the article goes into, they introduced a non-gendered washroom. Probably one of my favorite non-gendered washrooms that I've ever seen in museums, because it is a large, stalled bathroom. It is not a single stall. that's just a disabled washroom that's reformatted. It was a full room with multiple stalls that was just available for anyone.

And so this exhibition brought this part of history into a new light, looking at it from a different perspective that people really attach to. I highly recommend reading that article, *Curating a Third Gender* by Asato Ikeda, from volume five, number four of TSQ, November 2018. I have it right here [laughs].

It's a really good article, and it introduces a lot of interesting questions. How do you interpret histories that are culturally specific while also recognizing that we exist in the culture today and speaking to an audience today?

Hannah Hethmon: Yeah, and I will make sure to link to everything we've talked about in our show notes as well as your resource list. So anyone listening who's like, I'm driving, I didn't write that down, we'll make sure that that's linked so you can easily find it later and get a hold of it and give it a read and start learning. So lastly, we've talked about a lot. I hope it's sparked a lot of ideas and conversation for people.

But I wanted to ask what's next for you? What opportunities are you looking for in the museum field? Where do you hope to go in your career?

Amelia Smith: It's always an open book. The next page is yet to be written. Still looking for the next thing.

I'm hoping to continue to explore these topics and I hope that many more people find them to be exciting, find them to be engaging and add their voices, add their experiences because I think that that is so important right now when so much is happening. We need to really dig in and dig into what can be done.

Hannah Hethmon: Yeah, that's great. Well, thank you so much for your time and your insights. It was great to have you on the show. Thank you.

Amelia Smith: Thank you very much for having me.

Hannah Hethmon (Narration): *Thanks for listening to We the Museum. You've been listening to my conversation with Amelia Smith, a transgender emerging professional based in Toronto, Canada.*

For show notes with links to subjects discussed in this episode and a transcript, visit the show website: WeTheMuseum.com.

You can read more from Amelia on her website: notyouraveragecistory.com, which again, is linked in the show notes.

Once again, a big thank you to our show sponsor, Landslide Creative. Making a podcast takes a lot of time and energy, and I wouldn't be able to set aside the space to make this show without

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