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# Queer Is Here, Hopefully to Stay: The Incorporation and Reception of LGBTQ+ History at the History Colorado Center

## Abstract

Historically, the documentation of LGBTQ+ histories, struggles, and accomplishments has been absent from museum collections and exhibitions. Scholars argue that given the authoritative nature of museums and their influence on the public, exclusions of LGBTQ+ history can amount to institutional erasure of queer identities. However, in the past decade, there has been an increase in attempts to document and curate exhibitions highlighting and encouraging the public to engage with LGBTQ+ history. While this history is imperative to preserve and display, it can be met with controversy, leading some LGBTQ+ history exhibitions to be relocated or even removed. During the summer of 2022, I conducted a museum ethnography of History Colorado's LGBTQ+ History exhibition, *Rainbows & Revolutions* to answer the following research questions: 1) How do state history museums incorporate and display LGBTQ+ histories in their collections and exhibits, and 2) How do the public and members of the LGBTQ+ communities react to LGBTQ+ history and representation in a public museum? I investigated these questions through participant observation, staff and object donor interviews, and post-exhibit surveys. In the thesis to follow I share my findings in order to offer detailed insight regarding the incorporation and public reception of LGBTQ+ at Colorado's state history museum.

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Queer is Here, Hopefully to Stay: The Incorporation and Reception of LGBTQ+  
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Presented to  
the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences  
University of Denver

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
Madeline Ohaus  
June 2023  
Advisor: Dr. Christina Kreps, Ph.D.

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Author: Madeline Ohaus

Title: Queer is Here, Hopefully to Stay: The Incorporation and Reception of LGBTQ+ History at the History Colorado Center

Advisor: Dr. Christina Kreps, Ph.D.

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### **Abstract**

Historically, the documentation of LGBTQ+ histories, struggles, and accomplishments has been absent from museum collections and exhibitions. Scholars argue that given the authoritative nature of museums and their influence on the public, exclusions of LGBTQ+ history can mount to institutional erasure of queer identities. However, in the past decade, there has been an increase in attempts to document and curate exhibitions highlighting and encouraging the public to engage with LGBTQ+ history. While this history is imperative to preserve and display, it can be met with controversy, leading some LGBTQ+ history exhibitions to be relocated or even removed. During the summer of 2022, I conducted a museum ethnography of History Colorado's LGBTQ+ History exhibition, *Rainbows & Revolutions* to answer the following research questions: 1) How do state history museums incorporate and display LGBTQ+ histories in their collections and exhibits, and 2) How do the public and members of the LGBTQ+ communities react to LGBTQ+ history and representation in a public museum? I investigated these questions through participant observation, staff and object donor interviews, and post-exhibit surveys. In the thesis to follow I share my findings in order to offer detailed insight regarding the incorporation and public reception of LGBTQ+ at Colorado's state history museum.

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## Chapter 1 : Introduction

The documentation and representation of LGBTQ+ histories, struggles, accomplishments, and everyday narratives have been extensively and historically absent from museum collections and their corresponding exhibitions. In Jason Cyrus' 2020 paper *Challenging Heteronormativity in Museums*, the author states that “given the authoritative nature of museums and their powerful influence on the public, such omissions [of LGBTQ+ history] mount to institutional erasure of the queer identity,” (Cyrus 2020, 5). However, in the past decade, there has been an increase in attempts to document and curate exhibitions highlighting and encouraging the public to engage with and learn more about LGBTQ+ history (Sullivan and Middleton 2019). This thesis is a case study, museum ethnography, and investigation of how the History Colorado Center (HCC), the state-owned and operated history museum in Denver, Colorado, has sought to incorporate LGBTQ+ history within its museum collections and exhibitions through the Colorado LGBTQ+ History Project that was funded by the Gill Foundation and the resulting 2022 LGBTQ+ history exhibition, *Rainbows & Revolutions*. This research builds upon existing work in Queer Theory in Anthropology and adds to the growing literature in Museum Anthropology on the importance of LGBTQ+ history and representation in museum spaces (Hein 2011; Adair and Levin 2020; Janes and Sandell 2019; Mills 2006; 2008; Sandell 2017; Sandell and Nightingale 2012; Sullivan and Middleton 2019).

I focused my research on History Colorado's initiative because of my connection to the museum. Before attending the University of Denver to pursue my master's degree, I worked at History Colorado for two years in various departments. The Colorado LGBTQ+ History Project began during my time there. During my employment, I worked alongside the LGBTQ+ history project's curator, Aaron Marcus, to solicit donations, conduct oral histories, and actively build History Colorado's collections of LGBTQ+ related artifacts. Additionally, I chose HCC because it is a public, state-owned, and operated museum. Though the exhibition received private funding from the Gill Foundation, History Colorado's exhibition is one of the first public, state-owned and operated exhibitions focused on LGBTQ+ history to be displayed in a state history museum. Furthermore, I was interested in how and if the positionality of being state-owned influenced the concepts and narratives displayed within the exhibition and whether the public nature and accessibility impacted how the public responded to the exhibition.

I am interested in this research due to my experience as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. While growing up in North Carolina, I had no exposure to LGBTQ+ history. Though I often frequented museums, I never saw LGBTQ+ history highlighted. When I ultimately saw LGBTQ+ histories represented at a museum during a visit to the Schwules Museum in Berlin, I finally saw someone like myself represented in the collection and displays. I could not help but think getting the chance to see an exhibition highlight and discuss LGBTQ+ history at a younger age would have been life-changing. This representation would have let me realize much earlier that countless

people like myself existed throughout history and that these stories are worth preserving and sharing. Including LGBTQ+ representation within museums and exhibition spaces is essential because it allows LGBTQ+ individuals to identify themselves within history and enforces the notion that we have always been here and will continue to be here.

My exploration into the development process, and ultimately the reception, of *Rainbows & Revolutions*, provides a fundamental investigation in understanding how history museums in the United States can work to incorporate and display LGBTQ+ narratives while also gaining insight into how the public responds to the highlighting of LGBTQ+ history at state-operated history institutions. Though this case study and ethnography are by no means representative of how all museums and state-owned institutions can and should go about incorporating LGBTQ+ narratives, it works to provide insight and information on approaches that may work and those that may present challenges throughout this process. Finally, as mentioned earlier, this research and corresponding thesis paper actively builds upon existing work in Queer Theory within Anthropology and adds to the growing literature on the importance of LGBTQ+ history and representation overall in museums and cultural institution spaces.

## **1.1 Chapter Summaries**

In Chapter 2, I discuss essential historical background information to put my research, the collecting initiative, and the exhibition at History Colorado into a broader context and perspective. I begin by offering a brief overview regarding the history and founding of the History Colorado Center and its development over time into becoming the state cultural institution it is today. This chapter also offers insight into how History

Colorado's settler colonial history continues to influence the museum. Following an overview of History Colorado as an institution, I look to the history of the Ballantine Gallery, where *Rainbows & Revolutions* was situated. Finally, in this chapter, I provide background information regarding the original impetus for the contemporary LGBTQ+ collecting project at History Colorado and, furthermore, how the *Rainbows & Revolutions* exhibition came into existence.

In Chapter 3, the literature review, I begin by discussing an overview of the colonial legacies and histories of museums, focusing on how history museums in the United States came into legitimization. Then, with this colonial legacy in mind, I discuss how history museums in the United States have shifted their methodologies in recent years regarding how they portray historical narratives to the public and serve their communities. I also seek to understand the role of contemporary public history museums within the United States. Additionally, I highlight recent literature that discusses the transition from LGBTQ+ exclusion to inclusion within museum collections and exhibits, highlighting some examples of other LGBTQ+ exhibitions and discussing previous research conducted on these exhibitions.

Chapter 4 seeks to examine my use of specific theoretical frameworks that have informed my work throughout this research project. While I could have utilized numerous theoretical frameworks for this project, the main theories I have chosen to employ are Critical Museology/New Museum Ethics, Queering the Museum, Queer and Feminist Theory, and Critical Intersectionality. In this discussion, I will examine how these respective theoretical frameworks informed my research questions and the

methodology I employed to understand better the incorporation and reception of LGBTQ+ histories and narratives in museum spaces.

In Chapter 5, I explain my research design and the various methodologies I employed during my fieldwork for the Summer of 2022. This chapter highlights the methods I utilized in order to collect data from visitors, staff, and donors to the museum, as well as information regarding my participation observation through attending exhibit development meetings as well as my role in soliciting donations to the collection. In this chapter, I also explain the approaches I undertook to analyze the data I collected to reach my ultimate findings. Finally, in this chapter, I address various ethical considerations relating to this research project and thesis paper and discuss how my positionality has impacted my work to date.

In Chapter 6, I analyze and synthesize my data and share my initial findings on the incorporation and reception of LGBTQ+ history at the History Colorado Center. I draw connections between my multiple lines of evidence from semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and survey data to demonstrate how I reached my conclusions. First, I present and analyze the challenges and successes perceived by the History Colorado staff, who worked to collect and document LGBTQ+ history for this project. Next, I discuss in detail the exhibit development process behind *Rainbows & Revolutions*, utilizing data from my staff interviews to give insight into this project and illuminate specific challenges the staff faced. Once I have established clear lines of evidence documenting staff perceptions, I then shift the focus towards investigating the experiences of LGBTQ+ donors to the collection and exhibition through the use of semi-

structured interview data. I conclude this section by analyzing semi-structured interview data from staff and donors, post-exhibit survey data, and overall daily attendance numbers to the exhibition to offer insight into the internal and public reception of *Rainbows & Revolutions*.

In Chapter 7, I look toward the future of this collection and exhibition at the History Colorado Center. While much of my research focused on the development and reception of the exhibition, I collected a variety of noteworthy data and information regarding what is next for History Colorado and this specific collection. This section will discuss the importance of the continuation of this project and how it is vital to the research questions at hand.

Chapter 8 of this thesis will serve as a conclusion to my findings and research project. This chapter will summarize the primary objectives of my project, review the methodology and analysis, and give a summary overview of my finding and conclusions. Additionally, in this chapter, I discuss the limitations I experienced while collecting data for this project and ethnography and my various reflections relating to this project. Finally, this section offers insight into possible future research relating to the History Colorado Center are their LGBTQ+ History exhibit, *Rainbows & Revolutions*, which unfortunately fell outside the scope of this particular project.

## **1.2 A Word on Words**

Finally, before I begin, I feel it is imperative that I discuss the specific terminology I have decided to use throughout this project and the corresponding thesis. There is a wide variety of terms that could be employed when speaking about

LGBTQIA+ identified individuals and their history. However, for the purposes of this project and my research, I have decided to use the acronym of LGBTQ+ when referring to the community. LGBTQ+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning, and the + stands in for a variety of other identities that are part of the community, such as Intersex, Asexual, and more.

I am not claiming or asserting that using LGBTQ+ rather than other terms is the correct or only way to refer to the community. However, I have actively chosen not to use the word queer when referring to the collection or the exhibit unless someone I spoke with, or who participated in my data collection, explicitly identifies that way. The word queer was historically a slur used to identify LGBTQ+ individuals in a negative light. Though many people have reclaimed the word within the community to identify themselves, and the term is often used as an umbrella term for the community in many instances, this reclamation is not universal. In an attempt to respect individuals in the community who may still associate the word with negative connotations, I have thought it sufficient to use LGBTQ+ when speaking about the community throughout my research and writing this thesis. This decision was also directly influenced by conversations I participated in with older LGBTQ+ individuals during my research. That being said, I still utilize the word queer when referring to queer theory and queer museum theory, in specific cases when individuals identify in that regard, and finally, when quoting scholars who have chosen to use the word as an umbrella term. Likewise, with my data collection and findings, I refer to individuals with the specific label they identify with concerning the LGBTQ+ community when possible.



While I have decided to utilize the acronym LGBTQ+ when referring to the community, the collecting project, and the exhibit, the title of this paper does utilize the word queer. The use of the word queer in the title is reminiscent of the chant sung by LGBTQ+ activists in the 1990s, “We’re here, we’re queer – get used to it!” This chant indicates the reclamation of the word queer by some members of the LGBTQ+ community, which I briefly discussed above. This use of the play on words in my title illustrates the need for more permanent incorporation of LGBTQ+ narratives and history within museum spaces rather than just focusing on temporary exhibits if cultural institutions aim to be genuinely inclusive.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that I am not asserting that one way of referring to the community is more correct, or even more inclusive, than another. Instead, I simply wish to explain the motivations behind my word choices and selections throughout this thesis.

## **Chapter 2 : Historical Background**

Throughout this chapter, I provide an overview of the historical context of the Historical Colorado Center, discussing its origins and how it has developed into the state history museum it is today. Additionally, I provide background regarding the development of the curator of LGBTQ+ history position and LGBTQ+ collecting initiative at the History Colorado Center, giving insight into how the exhibition *Rainbows & Revolutions* came to be.

### **2.1 Background of the History Colorado Center**

The History Colorado Center of Denver, Colorado, is a “501(c)(3) charitable organization and an agency of the State of Colorado under the Department of Higher Education” (“About History Colorado | History Colorado” n.d.). History Colorado’s legacy, like the vast majority of museums and cultural institutions, holds a history that is entangled in colonialist and elitist pasts. Originally named the State Historical and Natural History Society, the organization was founded in 1879, a mere 15 years after the enactment of the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864. The Society found its establishment through the initiative of William D. Todd (Hafen 1953a). Though Todd originally came from Philadelphia, he settled in Colorado in 1873 and served on the House of Colorado legislature. Six years after his arrival in Colorado, Todd drafted House Bill No. 134, which proposed forming both a state historical society and natural history society (Hafen 1953a).

Like the majority of state historical societies throughout the United States, the Colorado State Historical Society, and Natural History Society was founded on the notion of manifest destiny, that the colonial settler expansion of the West was a success to be documented, gathered, preserved, and disseminated to the larger publics (Alexander 1960). In the original encouragement for the historical Society, the bill stated the following;

Whereas the history of Colorado, being yet unwritten, and existing now only in tradition or fragmentary manuscripts of private individuals and of the public press; and whereas the natural history of Colorado, as represented by published essays of scientists and by preserved specimens, is set forth only by organizations and museums without the state, in this country and in Europe; and whereas the opportunity, now so evident, for making a permanent record of these essential elements of our prosperity, is fast passing away, so that a few years hence, both the men who have been the actors, and the material for collections, will be quite beyond our reach; and whereas, it is believed that many valuable historical papers, and specimens of our natural history, would be contributed to a properly organized society; therefore, in order to encourage and promote the advancement of these material interests, and to establish a state museum. (Hafen 1953a)

The bill passed on February 13, 1879, and thus the Colorado State Historical Society came into fruition (Hafen 1953a).

Though it now holds the status of a public institution and admission is free of cost to all children under the age of eighteen (“Visitor FAQs: Hours, Ticket Prices, Parking, Discounts, and More | His” n.d.), this was not always the case. In the early days of its formation, membership to the Colorado State Historical Society was harshly restricted. One could only be granted acceptance into the Society through the reference of two existing members and had to be approved by a vote of three-fourths of present members (Hafen 1953a). The charter members of the Society included individuals such as John Evans, the governor who oversaw Colorado during the Sand Creek Massacre, William

Byers, who owned the Rocky Mountain News, the paper “that served as the massacre’s leading cheerleader” (Convery III 2012, 22) and Scott Anthony, a Major in the First Colorado Calvary who personally led troops during the massacre (Convery III 2012, 22). These charter members of the Society were tasked with collecting, documenting, and preserving what they deemed to be the definitive history of the state. Therefore, from its foremost origins, the gathered and recorded history of Colorado and the subsequent collections of the Colorado Historical Society represented a white, male, Eurocentric perception of the past that would then serve to inform the future. Furthermore, the Society’s collecting goals confirmed a “progress-oriented interpretation of the past” (Convery III 2012, 23), one that benefitted from the practice of salvage archaeology and explicitly promoted the concept of settler colonialism.

Although membership to the Society was vigilantly regulated, according to the original constitution of the Society, “all specimens, manuscripts...belonging to the society [would] be stored in a state building and under certain wise restrictions [would] be open to the inspection of the public,” (Vickers 1879). However, though there is a strong focus on education at the museum in the present day, during its formational years, children under the age of twelve were not allowed any access to the Society “unless accompanied by persons responsible for their good behavior and any destruction of property they may cause,” (Hafen 1953a, 169).

The first appointed president of the State Historical Society was Frederick J. Bancroft, who served as a Union Army surgeon during the Civil War and later on as the Denver City Physician from 1872-1878 (Noel 2021). During Bancroft’s serve as the

president, there was a growing concern about the removal of artifacts related to Mesa Verde from the state to other institutions and collections. This concern resulted in the procurement of the first extensive collection at the Historical Society, the Wetherill collection – the largest assemblage of Mesa Verde artifacts and materials that remains a highlight of the collection today (Noel 2021).

After occupying various temporary office spaces around the city of Denver, the collections and museum moved to a more lasting and spacious location in the basement of the Colorado State Capitol in 1895 (Noel 2021). This ability to occupy a permanent space led to the collections and museum becoming increasingly accessible to the broader public. According to a curator’s annual report that dates to 1899, the museum hosted over 100,000 visitors in that year and acquired over 3,000 items into the collection (Hafen 1953a, 185). This prompt growth in visitation and expansion of the collection inspired the Society to devise a way to secure its own building, separate from the state capitol. In the same curator’s report from 1899, the curator argued that “no state has done more for the rapid settlement and development of the West than Colorado” (Hafen 1953a, 185) and what the Society needed was a “large and handsome building – a monument to the pioneers of our heroic period,” (Hafen 1953a, 185). Moreover, the collection’s growth ultimately led to the split between the Historical Society and the Natural History Society, which resulted in the formation of the Colorado Museum of Natural History, known today as the Denver Museum of Nature and Science (Noel 2022).

Sixteen years later, on September 2, 1915, the state of Colorado opened the Colorado State Museum, located on East Fourteenth street across from the capitol, to

house the collections and offices of the Colorado State Historical Society (Hafen 1953b, 297). This newly constructed building, situated in a prominent area in the city, was designed to mimic a neo-classical palace and directly exemplifies the concept of the museum as a temple for the Society that sustains it (Cameron 1971). While it underwent various changes during the following decades, including expanding its interests into the fields of historic preservation of the city and the further state, the Society remained housed in the building on East Fourteenth street until the late 1970s (Noel 2021). At this time, once again, the museum ran into the issue of a lack of space for housing collections. This lack of space resulted in the move to a new building on Thirteenth Avenue and Broadway, where the museum was housed until it relocated to its current building (Noel 2022).

In efforts to grapple with the settler colonialism ties of their founding and early formation, History Colorado has made extensive strides in the previous decades into the present day to be an ethical and respectable museum of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Most notably, the center's approach to the collection, preservation, and display of Native American history has shifted drastically. With the passing of the Native American Graves Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, History Colorado's NAGPRA program quickly became a model for collaborative stewardship, completing their inventories in a timely manner and facilitating the repatriation of over 2,000 objects and remains in the collection (Harms 2011). Moreover, History Colorado's implementation of NAGPRA "put an emphasis on human rights law in its nationally unique decision to share its NAGPRA liaison with the Commission on Indian Affairs" (Harms 2011, 618). Though

this position is no longer shared, History Colorado continues to work closely with the Colorado Commission on Indian Affairs. This close work encourages transparency within their repatriation efforts and allows for more straightforward and direct communication with their tribal partners (Harms 2011, 619). Though this can be considered significant progress, acknowledging, and attempting to reconcile colonial pasts and how they influence the present is not a static goal to be met. Instead, it consists of an ongoing process of “speaking the hard truths of colonialism and thereby creating spaces for healing and understanding” (Lonetree 2012, 5).

In 2008, the Society changed its name to History Colorado with the hopes of signifying new directions and altering its public perception to one of a more dynamic institute (Noel 2022). Additionally, four years later, on April 28, 2012, History Colorado moved into its current home. Located in what is often referred to as the Golden Triangle Creative District of Denver, the History Colorado Center sits among other cultural institutions such as the Denver Art Museum and the Central Branch of the Denver Public Library (see Figure 2.1). The new building houses the museum—including the exhibitions, collections storage, and office space—the Colorado Historical Society, The Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, the Stephen H. Hart Research Center, and the State Historical Fund. Furthermore, History Colorado currently oversees a collection of museums and historic sites across the state of Colorado. History Colorado’s current mission statement is as follows, “History Colorado creates a better future for Colorado by inspiring wonder in our past” (“About History Colorado | History Colorado” n.d.). They

further expand on this mission by explaining their goals and offerings on their website as follows:

We offer access to Colorado’s history through cultural and heritage resources like our museums and historic sites statewide, programs for families and adults, stewardship of Colorado’s historic treasures, and resources for students and teachers making a positive impact on preschoolers, students in grades K-12, and those in higher education. We provide programs and services related to historic preservation and archaeology, as well as access to a vast collection of archives, artifacts, and historical photography. We strive to be a place of belonging for all Coloradans and to serve as a platform for community connection. We’re committed to Colorado’s diverse communities through programs... At its heart, History Colorado fosters cultural understanding, preserves, and protects the physical, cultural, and emotional places that are important to our communities, and encourages appreciation of what makes Colorado Colorado. (“About History Colorado | History Colorado” n.d.)



Figure 2.1: The History Colorado Center  
(Photo Taken from the History Colorado Website)

In opening its current building, History Colorado underwent an extensive evaluation of their exhibitions and how they deliver the state’s history to their prospective audiences—in this evaluation of exhibitions, former State Historian William Convery III



noted that History Colorado “must cultivate citizenship and apply history in ways that allow our community to think critically about the past and imagine a better present and future.” (Convery III 2012, 7). To inform the new museum and its displays, exhibit developers at History Colorado “underwent a self-imposed crash study program in recent museum theory” (Convery III 2012, 2). While the previous museum focused on displaying objects in chronological order with densely worded text panels (Convery 2012), the staff opted to organize the new building’s exhibitions in a thematic methodology. This meant that rather than concentrating on displaying a high number of objects, the museum would prioritize sharing stories while seeking “to engage the state’s diverse populations and to reconsider the state’s contested past and contemporary identity” (Smith and Foote 2017, 132).

While some individuals found this restructuring of the exhibitions and the methodology behind the displays to be progressive, inclusive, and engaging, the museum also received significant criticism for the new approach. These critiques have cited the overall lack of artifacts, the overt targeting towards children, discontinuity in narratives, and an absence of in-depth community collaborations as resulting in the institution being “less successful in achieving its goal of helping Coloradoans use history to deal with twenty-first-century issues,” (Ore 2013, 169). Most noteworthy of these critiques were directly pointed to the exhibit *Collision*, which attempted to showcase the history of the Sand Creek Massacre. Due to their audience-first methodology and lack of tribal consultation, the exhibition received heightened backlash from museum critics and tribal members alike. As a result, *Collision* ultimately closed in April 2013 (Hoadley 2020).

Despite the varied responses to History Colorado’s new museum and approach to exhibit display, the museum has spent the past decade since its 2012 reopening attempting to illustrate its commitment to highlighting underrepresented narratives and encouraging critical conversation about histories that have been deemed difficult to discuss through exhibitions such as *El Movimiento* and *Written on the Land*. Furthermore, in 2022, after over nine years since the exhibit closed due to controversies, History Colorado reopened its exhibition about the Sand Creek Massacre. Informed by nearly a decade of tribal consultations, the new exhibition, *The Sand Creek Massacre: The Betrayal that Changed Cheyenne and Arapaho People Forever*, emphasizes shared authority and the importance of collaborating with source communities.

In just the past few years, History Colorado has undergone additional changes that bring us to the present moment. Some of these efforts include the following:

Beginning in 2019, History Colorado has added curators of Latino Heritage and LGBTQ+ History to its staff and added a full-time position to its Museum of Memory team, which works proactively to incorporate underserved communities and voices into its contemporary collecting initiative and other efforts. The History Colorado Center is the nation’s first state history museum to display a monument toppled last summer [2020] with new, inclusive interpretation. History Colorado now shares anti-racist grounding virtues in all of its job postings and asks all applicants to describe how these principles show up in their work. (“History Colorado Welcomes Key New Staff Members | History Colorado” n.d.)

Moreover, in 2019 the museum opened a new gallery space on the first floor: the 1,100-square-foot Ballantine Gallery (“New Gallery for Community Partnerships Opens at History Colorado Center,” n.d.). This gallery was created as a space for the museum to experiment with new forms of story-telling while highlighting “niche stories in collaboration with community groups with whom they have never partnered” (Sealover

2020). Upon its creation, multiple years of short-term exhibits were planned to be presented in the Ballantine gallery with the specific goal of displaying objects and telling stories that had previously been deemed too insignificant or niche. According to History Colorado's Chief Creative Officer, Jason Hanson, the opening of the Ballantine Gallery meant the museum could "be more responsive in addressing some of those stories that are out in the community to tell but maybe aren't the big 5,000-square-foot exhibits," (Sealover 2020). Since 2019, the Ballantine has hosted exhibits focused on Colorado Jewish history, Chicano history, and the history of Five Points, Denver's historically Black neighborhood. In February 2020, along with the appointment of an LGBTQ+ curator, it was announced the Ballantine Gallery would be the space to host the state of Colorado's first-ever LGBTQ+ history exhibition during Pride month of 2022.

## **2.2 LGBTQ+ Collecting Initiative and *Rainbows & Revolutions* Exhibit**

Colorado has many aspects of LGBTQ+ history that are unique and noteworthy, from being known as the "Hate State" due to a legislative decision to exclude LGBTQ+ identities as a protected class to being the first state with an openly gay governor. Based on the History Colorado Center's past, their current efforts, and their commitment to the values and mission statement mentioned above, it follows accordingly that they would collect, preserve, document, and display Colorado's LGBTQ+ history. In February 2020, the History Colorado Center announced the appointment of a new curatorial position, the Gill Foundation Associate Curator of LGBTQ+ History. The position of a specific curator to focus on LGBTQ+ history would be the first one of its kind in the state of Colorado and likely was the first of its kind at any state history museum in the United

States (Irizarry 2022). The Gill Foundation Associate Curator of LGBTQ+ History position was offered to and ultimately accepted by Aaron Marcus, who had been a part of the History Colorado Center's team since 2008, working as an exhibition researcher and, more recently, as the Photo Studio Manager. In the press release announcing the new position, History Colorado stated;

Over the next two years, Marcus will curate an exhibit to open in the new Ballantine Gallery at the History Colorado Center in 2022. It will travel to History Colorado sites throughout the state... The job focuses on building more robust scholarship and inclusive holdings at History Colorado, which dates back to 1879. The position is also responsible for increased engagement with—and public access to—LGBTQ historical resources and narratives community (“LGBTQ History: New Project, Curatorial Position at History Colorado Created by Partnership with the Gill Foundation | History Colorado” n.d.).

Though this position was announced in the year 2020, when speaking with Aaron Marcus, he noted that this particular project's origins could be traced back to as early as 2015, during his time as an exhibit researcher (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022). History Colorado's LGBTQ+ collecting initiative and exhibit research began when Marcus attended Denver PrideFest in 2015 to survey the LGBTQ+ community about what they would be interested in seeing within an LGBTQ+ history exhibit. However, shortly after getting the ball rolling and the exhibit research commenced, Aaron noted that the project was paused and ultimately canceled due to funding issues at the institution (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022). It was not until four years later, in 2019, that the project gained traction again when Tim Gill, the founder of the Gill Foundation, decided to fund the project. The Gill Foundation was founded in 1994 as a response to the passing of Amendment 2 in Colorado and since its founding it continues to be one of the United States' largest donors

supporting the effort and fighting for equal rights for the LGBTQ+ community (“LGBTQ History: New Project, Curatorial Position at History Colorado Created by Partnership with the Gill Foundation | History Colorado” n.d.). Aaron Marcus’s current position as the Tim Gill Foundation Associate Curator of LGBTQ+ History was established with the newfound funding from The Gill Foundation. Alongside funding Aaron’s position, the foundation also supported “outreach to all corners of the state to capture oral histories and source archival materials [relating to Colorado’s LGBTQ+ history]” (“LGBTQ History: New Project, Curatorial Position at History Colorado Created by Partnership with the Gill Foundation | History Colorado” n.d.).

In my interview with him in July of 2022, Aaron Marcus explained the beginning of the project, its loss of funding, and its reanimation in the following way:

The exhibit actually began a long time ago, in 2015... I was working with the Center on Colfax. And at that point in 2015, I had done the audience...testing... that Pride Fest for all that weekend. And we had a lot of data, and a lot of people were very excited about it. And then History Colorado had a lot of financial problems, and they killed all the exhibits that were being planned at that time, which that was one of them. So fast forward to 2019, October 2019 and Steve Turner, who [was] the Executive Director here at History Colorado, at the time, was contacted by the Gill Foundation, asking about how to archive and process their archives. And if they, if we – Steve Turner and History Colorado knew anybody who could do that. And he says, that’s what we do.... that’s what led to

this position, my position being funded by the Gill Foundation...that's where it all began (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022).

The Gill Foundation agreed to fund the project and Aaron's position for a two-year period that would result in an exhibition. After its display at History Colorado, the exhibit would travel across the state to the various other History Colorado sites and museums interested in hosting the exhibit. Since the project's official conception in 2020, in collaboration with the Gill Foundation, Aaron Marcus has traveled the state – COVID-19 permitting, to document, collect, and preserve the diverse and unique history of LGBTQ+ Coloradans. Along with the help of a team of interns, Marcus spent these two years of this position expanding the collection and working on curating the state's first-ever LGBTQ+ history exhibition. The project culminated with an exhibit located in History Colorado's Ballantine Gallery, which, as mentioned earlier, is a gallery space devoted to highlighting underrepresented histories through community partnerships and co-creation ("LGBTQ History: New Project, Curatorial Position at History Colorado Created by Partnership with the Gill Foundation | History Colorado" n.d.). The LGBTQ+ history exhibition, titled *Rainbows & Revolutions*, opened on June 4, 2022, in order to coincide with Pride month. Though it was initially slated to be on display for a short run of only six months, due to increased interest in the exhibit, it was revealed in late Fall of 2022 that the exhibit would instead be up for an entire year closing at the end of June 2023.

### **Chapter 3 : Literature Review**

To understand the significance of History Colorado’s exhibition *Rainbows & Revolutions*, one must first understand the colonial legacy of museums, the role history museums play in contemporary society, the historical background of the exclusion and erasure of LGBTQ+ identities within museum spaces, and the concepts that have led to positioning museums as a site for social inclusion. This chapter aims to highlight and explore varying literature that discusses how the colonial legacies of museums influence the modern concept of museums today as institutions of accepted truth and knowledge. Additionally, I discuss recent literature regarding representations in museum spaces, highlighting the path from LGBTQ+ exclusion to inclusion within exhibits and discussing existing research that has been conducted on understanding this shift towards LGBTQ+ inclusion within cultural and historical institutions. This chapter ultimately provides a space to situate the relevance of my research to understand the development and public reception of the History Colorado Center’s *Rainbows & Revolutions*.

#### **3.1 The Colonial Legacy of Museums**

The historical role of museums as institutions that, “created the ordered representation that contained, objectified, and reduced the colonized world for the paternalistic imperialism that characterized the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries,” (Boast 2011, 64) is a history that is widely discussed and agreed upon by museum scholars, anthropologists, and historians alike (Ames 1992; Bennett 1995; Harrison 1997:45–47;

Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Young 1990, 2001). The modern establishment of the museum in contemporary society can be directly traced from its early roots in the private cabinets of curiosities, also known as *Wunderkammer*, which were produced by European elites in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Harrison 1997). These cabinets consisted of objects that “showcased the exotic ‘other’ and became property of the European ‘civilized – physically validation of the rights for colonial expansion and power” (Macdonald 2022, 10).

Along with the expansion of both settler and exploitive colonialism, these private collections grew in size and were eventually transferred into public or oftentimes government ownership, thus the concept of the public museum was formed (Aldrich 2009; Ames 1992). Though the ownerships of these collections transformed, the objects remained a reflection of what the wealthy upper classes and establishment deemed important to collect in the first place. Additionally, this transformation from private cabinets of curiosities to public collections also resulted in a new perception of ownership and representation of these collections.

Once considered to reflect the personal views of the collector, the formation of these publicly available collections and museums shifted the meanings of these objects to one that was believed should be representative of the larger shared values and views of the society that held access to them. (Ames 1992, 21). In taking on this new meaning and increased accessibility to the wider public, “museums then became messengers, benefactors, and monuments to colonialism... used as conduits for justifying expansion, legitimizing racial exploitation and instilling colonial nationalism,” (Macdonald 2022,



10). Furthermore, the museum thus became a place where one, “would go to compare [their] own private perceptions of reality with what was the accepted and approved, and therefore ‘objective’ view of reality enshrined in the museum” (Ames 1992, 21).

### **3.2 The Role and History of Public History Museums in the United States**

According to a study published in 2023 by museum marketing research firm Impacts Experience, museums and cultural institutes are considered by over 230,000 US adults to be more credible and trustworthy than daily newspapers, NGOs (non-government organizations), and government agencies (Dilenschneider 2023). Furthermore, over 60% of individuals surveyed did not view museums as having or advocating for political agendas (Dilenschneider 2023). Additionally, a 2018 study conducted by the Institute of Museum of Library Services revealed that history museums and historical societies represent a vast majority of public and private cultural institutions within the United States today, encompassing nearly 50% of all museums across the United States (Institute of Museum and Library Services 2018) (see Figure 3.1). Additionally, each state within the United States has at least one historically focused museum owned, operated, and maintained by the state government in which it is located.

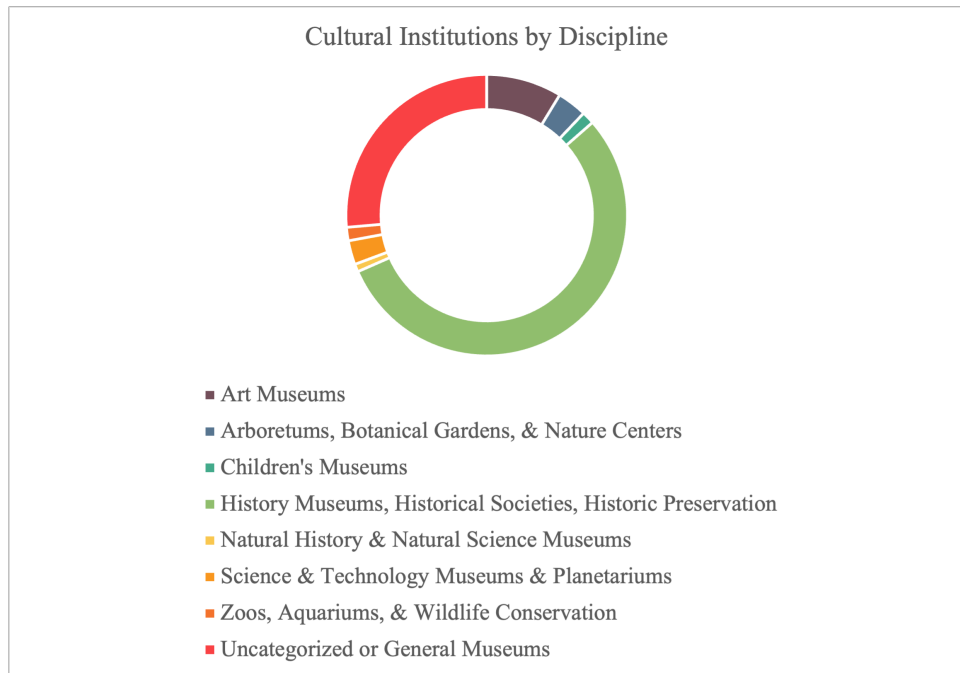


Figure 3.1: Cultural Institutions in the United States Categorized by Discipline. Data taken from Institute of Museum and Library Services 2018 Museum Data Files.

Due to the high prevalence of history-focused cultural institutions within the United States coupled with the overwhelming data highlighting the trust that American adults place in these institutions to deliver unbiased, credible, and fundamental information, it becomes imperative that we approach examinations of history museums in the U.S. with a critical understanding of how they emerged in our society today.

While a considerable body of literature focuses on the emergence of Natural History and Anthropology museums within the United States and the ties these institutions have to colonial histories, the colonial history of museums is critical to consider when understanding the role of history museums in society today.

The emergence of the historical museum in the United States can be traced back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century with the founding of historical societies that were established

momentarily after independence from Britain was gained (Alexander 1960, 1). These historical societies reflected the concept of both the antiquarian societies of Europe as well as the emergence of cabinets of curiosity, as discussed earlier. Furthermore, historical societies in the United States were founded on the belief that materials documenting the colonial expansion of the United States were of significant importance and should be collected, preserved, and disseminated to the larger public (Alexander 1960). Though many of these historical societies were initially an amalgam of historical documents, books, artifacts, and natural history specimens, eventually, “most historical societies gave away their natural history specimens [and] confined their fields to state or regional boundaries” (Alexander 1960, 1). This divergence has resulted in the split that we now know exists between museums of history and museums of nature and science, for example, the separation of the Denver Museum of Nature and Science and the History Colorado Center, as I illustrated in the previous chapter.

Though modern history museums continue to share commonalities with their natural history, science, and anthropological museum counterparts, they hold a unique role in society as a place where one visits to witness and learn “stories of [the] nation’s progress, triumph, and exceptionalism...[through] coherent versions of past events that distinguish one nation from any other and from which a collective consciousness of that nation is formed,” (Trofanenko 2010, 270-271). State history museums serve an even more distinct role in propagating and validating the history and identity of the state in which they are located. Historically, these institutions have been seen as a tool to influence citizenry and mold a unified identity and understanding of the past. Therefore,

it is not surprising that throughout the United States, “where most museums depend upon private donors, history museums [are] more likely to obtain direct tax support from the national state, or the state governments” (Zolberg 1995, 10).

As history museums became more prevalent and gained an increase in authority throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they continued to offer their public a unified version of United States history as it pertained to the state they were located in. This history was more often than not offered from the perspective of the white, straight men who were in power and played fundamental roles in the development of the state. Furthermore, history museums during this era embraced the concept of the all-knowing, authoritative curator, typically the job of someone with an academic, scholarly background in United States history (Filene 2017). It was not until the 1960s that history museums began to see any form of transformation in this respect, as this change was directly influenced by civil rights movements and political upheavals of this decade and the introduction of the concept of New Social History which worked to challenge the biases inherent in traditional scholarship (Filene 2017). This new perspective of historical accounts and scholarship aimed to “broaden Americans’ sense of who we are as a country” (Filene 2017, 330) but neglected to challenge or critically understand the relationships museums have with their respective public or consider the ways in which museums both validate and invalidate marginalized identities and their history.

Critical engagement with the ways history museums aid in shaping and validating identities did not become a topic of discussion within museums scholarship and professionals until more recently. Along with the rise of critical museology, which I will

discuss in more depth in the next chapter, in the past few decades, history museums and their professionals have begun to consider the more significant ramifications that the history they present has on society. Considering the tangible ramifications and impacts the presentation and display of the state's history has on the broader public, history museums have begun to contemplate how they can "provide a more plural and critical view of the past" (Trofanenko 2010, 271). Though this critical engagement is not specific to history museums but rather a concept embraced by varying genres of cultural institutions, history museums approached this new perspective of collecting and documenting history by shifting away from offering authoritative grand narratives and instead focusing on the multiplicity of narratives and highlighting the history of the everyday (Filene 2017). Opposed to the previously accepted role of museums as confirming a unified history of the state and its citizens, this shift towards multiplicity instead saw museums "as sites for individual, personal exploration of identity...[and] museums as places for reinforcing community identity," (Filene 2017, 331). Therefore, beginning just a couple of decades ago, we begin to see more diverse perspectives of history within historical museum settings as well as an overall shift from the concept of the all-knowing curator to the embracement of multiple voices and community members as experts.

### **3.3 LGBTQ+ Exclusion to Inclusion in US History Museums**

Despite this increase in embracing diverse perspectives and presenting historically marginalized narratives within history museums, LGBTQ+ history remained underrepresented throughout these institutions in both collections and exhibitions.

Though there has been some progress in the United States in the past few decades to collect, preserve, and exhibit material culture related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer history, this has not always been the case (Ridinger 2010). Excluding LGBTQ+ history from museums and exhibition narratives has played a significant role in the more extensive erasure of LGBTQ+ people throughout history. The omission of LGBTQ+ narratives, whether it be intentional or inadvertent, has palpable consequences for those who identify within the LGBTQ+ community as:

Omission from the museum does not simply mean marginalization; it formally classifies certain lives, histories, and practices as insignificant, renders them invisible, marks them as unintelligible, and thereby casts them into the realm of the unreal. (Conlan 2010)

As many historical institutions across the United States, specifically state history museums, continue to disregard the diverse and indispensable history of the LGBTQ+ community, museum professionals, historians, and LGBTQ+ activists have attempted to combat this ongoing marginalization and erasure through the establishment of smaller, local, identity-based museums that various other marginalized communities have demonstrated success in previously. A few of these more local, focused museums and community archives include institutions such as the GLBT Historical Society Museum in San Francisco, the ONE Archives at the University of Southern California, the American LGBTQ+ Museum slated to open in New York City in a few years, and a variety of even more concentrated LGBTQ+ archives and private collections throughout the United States. This effort to cultivate smaller, more focused museums and archives that directly emphasize LGBTQ+ histories that have been cast aside by more prominent public institutions is a way to fill the gap and bring these narratives to light. Though this

progress to document, collect, and display LGBTQ+ histories at identity-based institutions is significant and contributes to more extensive public knowledge surrounding previously silenced narratives, many scholars argue it is not enough. At larger, public, and specifically state-owned history museums, it appears that heterosexuality is not only presumed but reproduced through the narratives of collections and exhibitions. As a result, visitors to these large institutions “continue to find primarily euro-centric heteronormative collections and narratives” (Robert 2016, 13). According to museum scholars Richard Sandell and Robert Janes, a lack of LGBTQ+ representation within larger public institutions, not just those of state museums, but across the global museum landscape has direct:

Consequences that powerfully impact LGBTQ [+] lives and help to create the conditions within which equality struggles are staged. It follows therefore, that an unwillingness on the part of museum to acknowledge and purposefully address the causes and consequences of widespread discrimination for LGBTQ [+] communities, is to be complicit in the practices that make this inhuman treatment permissible. (Janes and Sandell 2019, 4)

Craig Middleton and Nikki Sullivan, authors of the 2019 publication *Queering the Museum*, note that the absence of LGBTQ+ narratives may be revealing “discomfort with ‘queerness,’ or a fear of alienating visitors and/or entangling one’s organization in...scandals that erupt around [queer] exhibitions” (Sullivan and Middleton 2019, 28). It is also the case that when LGBTQ+ histories are included in these more prominent public institutions they often still reproduce hegemonic structures of white, cis, heteronormative narratives through the promotion of an assimilation agenda where “gays and lesbians get to take up the center... thereby sustaining rather than contesting heteronormativity” (Sullivan and Middleton 2019, 29).

While more prominent and public institutions tend to stray away from exhibiting LGBTQ+ narratives due to the hesitancies mentioned above, a handful of public-oriented history institutions within the United States have committed to telling these often underrepresented and neglected narratives. Unfortunately, when LGBTQ+ histories are displayed more publicly, they can be met with controversy, forcing some exhibitions to be relocated or ultimately closed. Most recently, in 2021, a traveling exhibit produced by the University of Missouri – Kansas City, titled *Making History: Kansas City and The Rise of Gay Rights* located within the Missouri State Capitol, was removed, and relocated to a smaller building outside the capitol after just three days of being on display (Hancock 2021). The small-scale exhibition consisted of twelve panels that highlighted the strides and accomplishments of the gay rights movement in Missouri and across the country. After being up for only a handful of days, the exhibit received negative responses from republican representatives, legislative assistants, and other employees of the state capitol. One legislative assistant who worked within the building explained his thoughts on exhibiting LGBTQ+ history in the state capitol via an email, noting that he “[found] it offensive that this particular aspect of history [was] being promoted” (Schallhorn 2021). As a result of these negative responses, the exhibition was relocated to a less prominent state building, therefore making the exhibit less accessible to the general public. Though this example illustrates the controversy that unfortunately is still associated with the collection, display, and educational programming surrounding LGBTQ+ history within the United States, there have also been a handful of exhibitions that found success in their display of LGBTQ+ history.



One example of an LGBTQ+ initiative and exhibition that was met with success and predominantly positive reception was the 2011 exhibit at the Chicago History Museum titled *Out in Chicago*. The Chicago History Museum, though it is not a state-operated history museum, did emerge from the Chicago Historical Society and is the oldest cultural institution in Chicago, Illinois (Austin et al. 2012). Though the temporary exhibit was on display from May 2011 to March 2012, the museum began integrating LGBTQ+ history a few years before this through special programming focused on guest lectures by LGBTQ+ scholars and community members (Austin et al. 2012). Despite challenges in the exhibition development process regarding what to display and what stories to highlight, the temporary exhibit, along with its special programming, was met with positive reception and high levels of engagement. Though the exhibition has been closed for over ten years now, programming on LGBTQ+ narratives remains to be one of the museum's most popular offerings (Austin et al. 2012). Furthermore, due to the exhibition's overall popularity, the Chicago History Museum plans to integrate more LGBTQ+ content into the museum's initiatives and interpretations in the near future (Ferentinos 2019). This example of the integration of LGBTQ+ history in a public history museum that was met with success and continues to attract sustained interest illustrates how when museums work to fill the gaps and commit to representing marginalized communities, that community and often time those outside the community, will offer great support in the endeavor.

Though there are other examples of exhibitions throughout both private and public museums of art, history, and science that have taken on the responsibility of

collecting and displaying LGBTQ+ narratives, in this section, I have offered two varying examples of recent LGBTQ+ history exhibitions and discussed how the public received them.

### **3.4 Previous Research on LGBTQ+ Inclusion in Museums**

Along with the increase in LGBTQ+ visibility in museum settings, there has also been increased research surrounding the topic. One of the most notable examples of this is a book published in 2019 titled *Queering the Museum*, written by Craig Middleton and Nikki Sullivan. The authors, Sullivan, and Middleton, entered the field of museum studies at a time when a paradigm shift was beginning to occur from museums being rendered and accepted as neutral institutions when it comes to topics of social inclusion and activism to the widely held current view that, “museums galleries and heritage organizations might engage in activist practice, with explicit intent to act upon inequalities [and] injustices” (Janes and Sandell 2019, i). These shifts in the museum field and the recognition of the impact that lack of inclusion and intentional exclusion can have on marginalized communities led Sullivan and Middleton to focus “more critical attention to the ways in which implicit, but nevertheless structural and structuring ideas, shape museums and the identities and actions of those who compose them” (Sullivan and Middleton, 2019, 6). In the opening of the introduction to the text, Middleton and Sullivan note that:

museums are both shaped by and shape the socio-political landscapes in which they operate and are thus implicated in systems of power and privilege... Despite growing sectorial concerns around inclusion, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer his/stories, lives and

identities, and issues continue to be largely absent in museums internationally and this has very real material effects for LGBTIQ+ identified people and their allies... Museums can and...should be active participants in the articulation of critically engaged and socially transformative ways of seeing, knowing, being, doing. (Sullivan and Middleton 2019, 1)

Sullivan and Middleton's research and resulting book urge museum professionals to consider the hegemonic structures and processes we engage within the museum sector and to "interrogate, and rework museological methodologies and their contributions to world-making," (Sullivan and Middleton 2019, 90). Furthermore, Sullivan and Middleton's examination "provides the sector with a manifesto and a blueprint to produce more interesting, effective, and relevant work" (Smith 2019, 205). Finally, the authors highlight the importance of interacting with these emerging exhibitions with a critical, intersectional, and nuanced eye toward the institutions they belong to. Sullivan and Middleton's research regarding the approaches to collecting and displaying LGBTQ+ history has provided my research with invaluable context.

In the last decade, there has been a variety of research and specific case studies working to combat preconceived notions regarding the display and reception of LGBTQ+ history in museum spaces, the impacts of temporary versus permanent exhibitions of LGBTQ+ history, understanding public reception of LGBTQ+ exhibitions, and much more. In this section, I will offer insights into previous literature and research regarding LGBTQ+ history within museum spaces to provide context and situate my research on History Colorado's exhibition, *Rainbows & Revolutions*.

A dominant narrative often utilized to justify the exclusion and silencing of LGBTQ+ narratives at museums, especially within family and youth-oriented museums,

is the argument that LGBTQ+ themes and history are inappropriate (Middleton 2022). However, this classification of LGBTQ+ history and its display as unsuited for younger audiences is often rooted in homophobia and is unsubstantiated. This ideology, though typically not consistent with the views of individual museum staff, is frequently the result of the assumed views of the museum's stakeholders, including board members (Middleton 2022). This assumption, used as justification for exclusion, perpetuates the stigmatization of LGBTQ+ people. Recent research and scholarship have focused on unsettling these preconceived notions of the inappropriateness of LGBTQ+ materials in museums that serve audiences diverse in age. In Margaret Middleton's 2022-chapter *Queer Museum Narratives and the Family Audience*, the author dismantles common reasons behind categorizing LGBTQ+ representation as inappropriate. Middleton argues:

Queer stories in museums can act as mirrors for children who have queer friends or family members, or who have already begun to come into their own queer identities. For other children for whom queerness is not visible to them in their lives already, queer stories in museums can be windows into another person's life. (Middleton 2022, 169)

Furthermore, arguments presented against the display of LGBTQ+ history on the bases of it being not appropriate for all audiences prioritizes the opinions and comfort of some at the expense of representation and validation of LGBTQ+ people and their history. If museums are genuinely committed to highlighting diverse and multi-perspective accounts of history in their collections and exhibitions, "Instead of focusing on the concerns of a bigoted few, they should acknowledge the rights of an oppressed group and have the courage to be their champions" (Vanegas 2003).

Contemporary scholarship surrounding the representation of LGBTQ+ histories within museum spaces has also considered the effects of pop-up and temporary exhibits that feature LGBTQ+ narratives versus the integration of LGBTQ+ narratives and histories throughout the museum more permanently (Frost 2008; Nguyen 2020; Middleton 2017; Sandell 2017). Since the 1990s, though there has been an overall increase in the willingness to collect and display LGBTQ+ related materials within museum spaces, the majority of these displays have been temporary, and very few museums have worked to integrate LGBTQ+ narratives adequately into their permanent exhibitions and collections (Sandell 2017). While some scholars acknowledge the benefits of pop-up or temporary LGBTQ+ focused exhibits arguing that this method of museum engagement “queer[s] the concept of the museum through [its] evasion of historical understandings of duration, acceptable object usage, and intended or imaged audience,” (Nguyen 2020, 87), many museum scholars contend that the ephemeral nature of these exhibits is denotative of the more significant issues surrounding LGBTQ+ exclusion. In their 2017 paper, Margaret Middleton notes, “When queer narratives are limited to temporary exhibitions during Pride Month or isolated in queer-themed galleries, it suggests that they are ‘special interest’ and ‘unimportant’” (Middleton 2017, 80). A lack of integration concerning LGBTQ+ inclusion at the permanent institutional level can perpetuate a one-dimensional interpretation of LGBTQ+ identities.

Furthermore, showcasing LGBTQ+ narratives in seclusion can result in a lack of demonstrating the intersectional identities that LGBTQ+ people hold. This critique is not to say that temporary or pop-up exhibits showcasing LGBTQ+ histories are not a crucial

component to the overall progress of LGBTQ+ inclusion within the museum, but instead asserts that if a cultural institution desires to be a genuine advocate for not only the preservation of LGBTQ+ stories but the continued fight for LGBTQ+ equity, “more enduring changes, which see same-sex love and gender diversity embedded into institutional narratives, are required to capitalize on the museums capacity to engage with and engender support for rights-related issues” (Sandell 2017, 155).

Finally, museum scholars, have sought to understand the impacts of LGBTQ+ exhibits and display have on those inside and outside of the community. One prominent study of visitor reception and engagement in regard to the display of LGBTQ+ history was conducted in 2018 by Dodd et al. in collaboration with the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries at the University of Leicester. This study attempted to gauge visitor perceptions and reactions to the 2017 *Prejudice and Pride* exhibitions and programming facilitated by the National Trust and held at multiple sites across the U.K. that the National Trust manages in order to reveal previously unknown LGBTQ+ histories.

Amongst a variety of research questions, the study aimed to understand if the LGBTQ+ specific programming prompted visitors to think differently about perceptions of history (Dodd et al. 2018). In order to answer this question, the research involved used a mixed-methodology approach, utilizing and analyzing visitor self-completion comment cards, semi structured and in-depth interviews, and finally the examination of emails and letters regarding the programming sent by both visitors to the sites and those who hold memberships to the National Trust. The study found an overwhelmingly positive

reception to the programming, with over 70% of visitors indicating their support to the exhibits and initiatives (Dodd et al. 2018). Additionally, visitors represented a varying spectrum of responses to the programming from complex criticism to active championing of the LGBTQ+ themes raised. Finally, the study discovered that the programming stimulated reflection within its visitors and helped to shift attitudes in many visitors and even inspired action in some. Furthermore, many visitors indicated they were emotionally moved by the programming in some way (Dodd et al. 2018, 10).

The above-highlighted research and academic scholarship aim to understand more comprehensively the public perception of LGBTQ+ narratives present within museums while urging museum professionals who wish to collect and display LGBTQ+ history to engage in their practice with a critical framework. Working together, the contributions I have summarized in this section provide invaluable context for examining History Colorado's exhibition, *Rainbows & Revolutions*, and its place within the broader landscape of LGBTQ+ representation in museum spaces.

## **Chapter 4 : Theoretical Framework**

A broad spectrum of literature and theoretical advances in museum studies and anthropology have informed every step of my research and analysis for this project. The main theories I have chosen to employ are Critical Museology, New Museum Ethics, Queer Theory, Queering the Museum, Feminist Theory, and Critical Intersectionality. The following section seeks to define these theoretical frameworks and explore how each theory is interwoven and essential to the research topic at hand.

### **4.1 Critical Museology and New Museum Ethics**

The research for this project draws immensely from the concept and associated writings of critical museology (Ames 1992; Lorente 2016; Shelton 2013; Vergo 1989). The history of museums as institutions is inseparable from a history of colonialism, violence, erasure, and exploitation (Ames 1992). For one to fully understand museums as we know them today, this history must be acknowledged, examined thoroughly, and put into greater context. This examination of museums' historical, political, and social structures is where the theory of critical museology comes into focus. Critically museology exists in tandem with the concept of a "new museology," which is in stark contrast to the "old museology" that was concerned with museum methods and practice over understanding the purpose and impacts museums have on larger society (Vergo 1989).



Though the theoretical framework of critical museology can be traced back to the late 1980s (Lorente 2012, 243; Ames 1992), Anthony Shelton is most notably recognized as coining the term and formalizing this subfield. In his 2013 article, “Critical Museology: A Manifesto,” Shelton states that critical museology:

Interrogates the imaginaries, narratives, discourses, agencies, visual and optical regimes, and their articulations and integrations within diverse organizational structures that, taken together, constitute a field of cultural and artistic production, articulated through public and private museums; heritage sites; gardens; memorials; exhibition halls; cultural centers; and art galleries. These fields are clearly related to competing subfields of power relations and economic regimes that are made partially visible through ideas and counter ideas of patrimony and social identity. (Shelton 2013, 8)

Through this emergence of the field of critical museology in conjunction with the call for museums to no longer be neutral and engage with inclusive and activist values, there has been broad recognition of how museums “have both intentionally and inadvertently, excluded those who being-in-the-world does not fit with the normative structures and rationalities of such institutions” (Sullivan and Middleton 2019, 18). Addressing this exclusion of identities that do not fit normative structures within a critical museology lens allows us to understand that though museums are not solely to blame for the inability of “all groups to secure and exercise their rights... neither are they disconnected from it” (Janes and Sandell 2019, 6). The acts of object collection, preservation, representation, and exhibition of history within a museum setting are inherently political. Critically museology inclines museums, museum scholars, and museum professionals alike to consider the real-life ramifications that these institutions’ interpretations of history and the stories they chose to highlight have on society and the individual. Critically museology accepts and seeks to defend the argument that museums,

Play a significant, but largely unacknowledged and overlooked part, in shaping the social and political conditions within which human rights are negotiated, continually recast, and disseminated, constrained, or advanced.” (Janes and Sandell 2019, 6)

Additionally, it is indispensable to emphasize that the employment of critical museology in practice does not end at the critique of the museum but instead goes a step further and works “to propose changes that are feasible, and to ground both criticism and reform in an understanding of the situation, the economic foundations, and socio-political formations of the museum to be gauged” (Ames 1992, 4). That is not to say critical museology is a tool that can alleviate museums of their entangled, complicated histories but rather when appropriately done it encourages, “institutions to adopt more experimental practices, champion openness, and transparency, and support critical community engagement” (Shelton 2013, 18). To encourage this reflexive critique of museum institutions, the theory of critical museology must also remain critical and reflexive of itself (Shelton 2013). Critical museology is a contingent field of inquiry, consistently being deconstructed and reconstructed with new understandings of the hegemonic structures in which it unfolds.

Furthering the theory of critical museology, museum ethics scholar Dr. Janet Marstine has developed what she calls a “new museum ethics” through which institutions can grow and acknowledge their moral agency while better serving the communities they work to represent and serve (Marstine 2011). In her chapter, *The Contingent Nature of the New Museum Ethics*, Marstine notes that this concept “is a feminist-inspired mode of critical inquiry defined by its contingent nature” (Marstine 2011, 3). Marstine’s new museum ethics are contingent inasmuch that they are deeply engaged with the world in

which they are situated as well as adaptive and self-reflective (Marstine 2011, 8). One of the new museum ethics' fundamental notions and goals is that museums and cultural institutions "must be willing to accept the responsibility of activism" (Marstine 2011, 13). Once this responsibility of activism is accepted, Marstine outlines three significant tenets of her new museum ethics theory for museums to engage with: 1. Social Responsibility, 2. Radical transparency, and 3. Guardianship of heritage.

The first tenet of social responsibility discusses the importance of combining democratic pluralism, shared authority, and the forwarding of human rights concerns as an integral practice if museums today aim to be ethical institutions that responsibly represent and serve their diverse communities. Marstine notes that "the ethical, socially responsible museum of the twenty-first century recognizes identities of its staff and its publics as hybrid and fluid, rather than simply boxes to be ticked" (Marstine 2011, 11). If we are to accept this theoretical stance, it is not merely enough to have one-off exhibitions relating to historically underrepresented populations; instead, museums must seek to understand the complexities of the communities they serve and radically rethink their role and purpose in society. The concept of the social responsibility of museums is increasingly applicable to my research, as I am interested in understanding how History Colorado's exhibition fits, or does not fit, into this narrative.

Marstine argues that the first tenet of social responsibility "will not flourish in museum culture unless...museums disclose what issues they are facing, the 'hows' and 'whys' of their decision-making processes and the larger impact of these choices" (Marstine 2011, 14). This disclosure of "hows" and "whys" is what she refers to as

radical transparency. Radical transparency is not, in fact, the sharing of all institutional information equally (Marstine 2011, 15); instead, it involves working with the community to create guidelines for information that should, and should not, be shared and encouraging open and honest communication between museums and the public that they serve.

Finally, Marstine discusses the tenant of guardianship of heritage. She examines how, for a museum to enact moral agency and embody the new museum ethics; we must turn a critical eye to the relationship between museums and the objects they hold, preserve, and display. Marstine proposes a concept of shared guardianship, one that

Leads to new thinking about collections management and access to this knowledge, admits the fluidity and complexity of identity in the cataloging of objects, rather than defining collections by the limits of software and taxonomic conventions. (Marstine 2011, 19)

These three tenets, when engaged concurrently, provide a way forward for museums to exist as moral and ethical agents in our society today.

Both the theory of critical museology and the practice of new museum ethics demonstrate Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, which examines how our ways of knowing and producing knowledge are learned, naturalized, and embodied over time and subsequently become second nature (Bourdieu 1991). Therefore, we reproduce and further enforce normalized epistemologies through our everyday actions, whether or not we are aware. This concept and theory ring especially true for the museum sector. In his article *Critical Museology: A Manifesto*, Anthony Shelton states

Only by theorizing museum practices do we become conscious of the presuppositions that we apply to our everyday work, and only through a rigorous deconstruction and reflexivity of that work can we develop fresh insights and

innovations necessary to ensure the future development of museums. (Shelton 2013, 14)

The fact that museums have a lack objects relating to LGBTQ+ histories “is not a historical accident... nor is it simply the result of conscious and intentional bias... rather... museum practitioners... tend to reproduce the habitus they inherit” (Sullivan and Middleton 2019, 26) often without questioning it or even realizing how they contribute to systemic erasure. Critical museology and the new museum ethics provide us with the analytical and practical tools to understand the habitus inherited by museums that have produced this exclusion and begin the work to address it and discuss how the field can begin to move forward towards a more ethically engaged future.

#### **4.2 Queer Theory and Queering the Museum**

Queer theory as a field of academic inquiry is difficult to define, as it “continues to struggle against the straightjacketing effects of institutionalism, to resist closure and remain in the process of ambiguous (un)becoming” (Sullivan 2003, V). Taking inspiration from other theoretical fields, such as post-colonial and post-structuralist theory, queer theory works to break down the perception of binaries that are assumed to be the standard and challenge the notion of defined and predetermined classifications. Queer theory is relevant to my research because for there to be LGBTQ+ representation within museums, museum professionals must directly engage with the ideology that there is no set “normal” or what one should expect to find in a museum. It also entails a complete reformation of how we see museums and their role in our society. Queer theory in a museum application problematizes the process of “othering” that is historically inherent to museum practices and leads to the “renegotiation of traditionally configured

binary positions [such as] ... museum director/curator...museum staff and their publics...museums and source communities” (Marstine 2011, 8), and so on. Queer theory calls for the fluidity of not only community identities and interpretations of history but the fluidity of objects as well. Drawing from Bruno Latour’s theories of object agency, queer theory contends that if ‘facts’ are interpretations, then objects are necessarily open to multiple interpretations [as well]” (Sullivan and Middleton 2019, 52-53).

In Robert Mills’ 2008 article, “Theorizing the Queer Museum,” he addresses what it means to approach museology work with a critical queer theory lens. Mills notes that “queer [theory] entails a refusal of meaning, registering a kind of disruptive negativity and incoherence at the heart of identity, language, and law; queer may well operate as a bar to the idea of the museum as a coherent, meaning-making machine” (Mills 2008, 46). According to Mills, in the utilization of queer theory, we break down what has historically been perceived as the dominant narratives in the museum setting. By disrupting this dominant heteronormative narrative of museum objects and exhibitions, we can “reveal that the configurations of objects, desires, and identifications that collection set in motion can be multi-layered, multi-dimensional experiences and that these are processes in which museum visitors are fully implicated in” (Mills 2008, 48). In Craig Middleton and Nikki Sullivan’s 2019 book *Queering the Museum*, the authors set forth a theoretical framework to understand what it means to queer the museum. In the introduction to the text, Middleton and Sullivan note that:

*Queering the Museum* takes as its starting point three claims commonly found in contemporary museological literature. The first is that museums are both shaped by and shape the socio-political landscapes in which they operate and are thus implicated in systems of power and privilege. The second is that despite growing

sectorial concerns around inclusion, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer his/stories, lives and identities, and issues continue to be largely absent in museums internationally and this has very real material effects for LGBTIQ+ identified people and their allies. The third is that museums can, and we contend, should be active participants in the articulation of critically engaged and socially transformative ways of seeing, knowing, being, doing. (Sullivan and Middleton 2019, 1)

Sullivan and Middleton utilize these three claims as theoretical frameworks on which to situate their larger argument and further elaborate on the queering of contemporary museum practices and spaces.

In the first section, “From LGBTQ+ inclusion to Queer Ethics,” Sullivan and Middleton focus on what it means to striving for LGBTQ+ inclusion within museum spaces by discussing institutional tokenism, embodied knowledge, queer/ing as a verb, and queer ethics. Building upon Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of habitus (Bourdieu 1991), Sullivan and Middleton theorize that our ways of knowing and producing knowledge are naturalized and embodied over time and subsequently become second nature. Therefore, we reproduce and further enforce normalized epistemologies through our everyday actions, whether aware of it or not. This concept also recounts Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power, in which he states that “symbolic power is that invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it” (Bourdieu 1991, 164).

Middleton and Sullivan also discuss how even once the exclusion of LGBTQ+ history is acknowledged and attempted to be remedied, “inclusion strategies often fail to really grapple with the complexities of difference... or to undertake the kind of critical self-reflection that is imperative if museums are to play an active role in radical change”

(Sullivan and Middleton 2019, 19). The authors argue that a strive for LGBTQ+ inclusion that lacks a total reconstruction of the idea of what a museum is and an understanding of what it means to queer the museum can also, in fact, reinforce heteronormative assumptions and institutions. The authors note that,

Rather than attempting to replace erroneous views of the past with true correct ones [queering the museum] is instead concerned with problematizing heteronormative ways of knowing and the inequitable effects of such, and opening up possibilities for being, knowing and doing other.” (Sullivan and Middleton 2019, 32)

Problematizing heteronormative ways of knowing rather than just including LGBTQ+ narratives into an already existing habitus of embodied knowledge is straightforwardly exemplified by the authors theorizing and applied implication of queer/ing meaning-making that they address in the third chapter. The concept of queer/ing meaning-making builds off of Bruno Latour’s work, poststructuralism, and queer theory. The authors define poststructuralism and, by association, queer theory as,

Not a dogma that demands we all reject ‘facts...’ [but] to explore how ‘truths’ are mobilized and meted out, how some ways of knowing, doing, and being are legitimized, normalized, and take on the mantle of ‘common sense.’ (Sullivan and Middleton 2019, 73)

In employing queer theory and poststructuralism to the concept of meaning-making within museum objects and exhibitions, the authors advocate for the importance of queering not only the belief that meaning is inherent in objects but also by integrating a pluralist, inclusive, complex, and transdisciplinary approach to the theory of multiple ontologies (Sullivan and Middleton 2019, 74). Drawing on the work of Bruno Latour the authors call for a new approach that, “seeks to (re)activate the potential force of objects to



assemble and transform people and ideas, to open up space for debate and for new knowledges and practices to emerge” (Sullivan and Middleton 2019, 74).

### **4.3 Feminist Theory**

Much of queer theory is entangled with and builds off of feminist theory. Feminist theory has recently grown popular within the museum sector and often goes hand in hand with implementing queer theoretical frameworks in museum practices. While there are various scholars who view feminist theory concerning museums as primarily relating to representations and interpretations of gender in museums space (Porter 1995; Callihan and Feldman 2018), for the purposes of my research, I am more interested in feminist theory as a broader lens through which to analyze and reconstruct the concept of otherness in museum spaces (Hein 2007; Hein 2010; Hein 2011). This line of feminist theoretical thought, while still engaging in a liberating focus, furthermore, seeks to understand and reconstruct restrictive barriers, analyze the concept of ownership, and make visible and denaturalize the processes and practices that have become normalized. In this sense, a feminist theory applied to museums exists in convergence with other theoretical movements, such as “postcolonialism, critical race theory, and queer theory in rejecting the dualistic polarization intrinsic to the mainstream Western tradition” (Hein 2011, 112).

In Hilde Hein’s 2007 article “Redressing the Museum in Feminist Theory,” the author argues that adopting a feminist theory within museum practice would strengthen and revitalize museums and broaden the base of their appeal. Hein maintains that the aim of feminist theory, similar to queer theory, “is not equality, but conceptual

reconstruction” (Hein 2007, 32.) While she does not seek to undermine the achievement of gender equality, it is essential to note what is being sought out is a total reconceptualization of what is subjective and what it means to be “othered.” This concept of questioning the processes and perpetuation of othering is inherent in queer theory as well. Utilizing a lens of feminist theory allows us to examine more closely the museums’ role in this process.

Additionally, engaging in a feminist theoretical approach when engaging with museum work allows institutions a new lens through which to view their audiences and the objects they collect, preserve, and ultimately interpret and display to the public. Following theoretical approaches to gender as a performative act as developed by feminist scholar Judith Butler (Butler 2006), Hein also seeks to acknowledge the performative aspect of museums and the meanings they construct and thrust onto the objects that fill them. Through this constructing of meaning, Hein argues that,

Entire genders and populations, together with their customs, possessions, and creations, are diminished as quaintly (or dangerously) subhuman according to a code they had no part in constructing. Museums have not been innocent bystanders to this injury. Simply by carrying out their designated function and executing the objectifying activity for which they are eminently qualified, they have perpetuated the practice – whether or not with malicious intent. (Hein 2011, 120)

Feminist theory works to place museum objects into a new perspective, viewing their meanings as everchanging and dynamic, as a process of performance, rather than viewing objects and their meanings as static and one-dimensional. The feminist theoretical museum also actively acknowledges the role of the visitor as fundamental to

the process of this meaning-making, in direct contrast to the approach of the visitor as passively receiving a predetermined product (Hein 2011).

Hein notes in conclusion that “applied to the discourse of the museum, feminist theory admits new ideas for consideration while casting old ones in a new light” (Hein 2007, 34). The lens of feminist theory in studying museums urges us to conceptualize how museums perpetuate the cis/heteronormative and patriarchal narratives often accepted as fact as well as reconstitute the relationship between museums, their objects, and their publics.

#### **4.4 Intersectionality**

The final framework I want to highlight is that of critical intersectionality (Collins 2015; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Crenshaw 1990). The theoretical framework of intersectionality engages with the two other theoretical frameworks I have covered thus far of queer theory and feminist theory. Furthermore, I argue that neither of the former approaches can succeed if not employed through a critical intersectional theory framework. The term intersectionality, employed as a framework approach in academia references,

the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities (Collins 2015, 2)

The framework of intersectional engagement is essential when discussing a community such as the LGBTQ+ community. The LGBTQ+ community is not a homogenous group but instead one that is inherently permeated with intersecting identities. Not only does each letter of LGBTQ+ represent a community of its own, but within those communities

– axes of gender, age, ethnicity, race, geographic location, class, ability, and more overlap and shape each individual experience and perception of the world in which they inhabit (Springate 2019). That is to say, there is no one coherent LGBTQ+ history, let alone a singular LGBTQ+ experience, but instead, there exists a multiplicity.

Despite this acknowledgement of the diversity of experiences and interpretations in the LGBTQ+ community, it is often the case within the representation of historically erased narratives in museum settings, such as with LGBTQ+ narratives, that only a single identity is showcased or permitted to be heard (Crooke 2006). While it is true that more museums and cultural institutions are engaging with the interpretation and display of LGBTQ+ history, it is pertinent to note that the majority of these representations have “favored a cisgender, homosexual, white male narrative” (Ferentinos 2019, 42) while often rendering invisible the experiences and histories of those on the further edges of the margin. Therefore, when discussing the inclusion of LGBTQ+ narratives, museums must utilize an intersectional framework to identify further who remains to be excluded in these representations and the repercussions of said exclusion.

While intersectionality also attempts to deconstruct binaries and highlight the overlapping of identities, it actively works to question and analyze the social structures, institutions, and dominant powers that work to regulate and produce this estrangement. In her 2014 paper, “Getting Intersectional in Museums,” Nicole Robert notes that:

Through [intersectionality], museum professionals become aware of existing power dynamics within daily choices and accepted practices. This act of reflection permits recognition of the ideologies at work within chosen systems of practice. By developing the deconstructive skills to decode and re-think those systems... museum professionals can respond intersectionally and effectively to marginalization within museums.” (Robert 2014, 26)

The issue of LGBTQ+ representation within museums is one that requires an intersectional approach, not only to deconstruct binaries and reflect on this systematic marginalization but to consider those who exist outside of the cis-gendered, male, white, and able-bodied identity. Furthermore, in aggregation with queer and feminist theoretical approaches to the museum, intersectionality further promotes the concept of multiplicity in interpreting and displaying the past, highlighting the importance of including numerous narratives and opening up the possibility of interpretation.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

In conclusion, this chapter has sought to introduce the relevant theoretical frameworks with which I approached my research of History Colorado's LGBTQ+ history exhibit. I began with a framework of critical museology and new museum ethics that situates museums as sites where knowledge is produced and acknowledges the role these institutions play in further perpetuating the concept of the other. From this basis, I then discuss what it means to approach critical museology through a lens of queer, feminist, and intersectional theories in order to locate and understand the hegemonic structure at play within the museum sector. The theories I have discussed work in tandem to help deconstruct the concept of the museum and make visible the power structures at play. These theories critically informed my research as they provided a framework to understand what the inclusion and interpretation of LGBTQ+ history may look like in museums today.

## Chapter 5 : Research Design and Methods

### 5.1 Project Formation and Research Questions

The impetus for this project began when I was working full-time at the History Colorado Center as a Guest Services Ambassador. In June 2020, I was conducting my daily walk-throughs of the exhibitions at HCC when I noticed an intriguing display within the Registration Window in the exhibit *Zoom In - The Centennial State in 100 Objects*. In this window, which looks into the registration room, staff at the museum can highlight various objects and artifacts that are either incoming into the collection or display collections that are currently being cataloged and updated. The specific display that caught my eye was curated by Aaron Marcus and showcased new LGBTQ+ acquisitions in the museum's collection. Marcus' display of LGBTQ+ objects in the registration window urged me to seek him out and begin participating in weekly professional development with the LGBTQ+ history project. Marcus' LGBTQ+-focused registration window was how I first learned about the LGBTQ+ history project at HCC and the exhibit that would be the focus of this research.

As I worked one day a week to create records for objects, transcribe LGBTQ+ oral histories, conduct historical research into existing items in the collection, and reach out to LGBTQ+ community members for object donations, it struck me that I had never seen LGBTQ+ history exhibited at a state museum. And upon further investigation, I learned this would be the first-ever LGBTQ+ history exhibit in a state history museum

space. This notion of the first LGBTQ+ state history exhibit sparked my curiosity into how a state museum becomes situated to collect these underrepresented histories and question how they could work to share these histories with the broader public; thus, my research topic came to be.

When I began to think through a research design for this project, I recognized two main questions I sought to answer and related, more focused questions for each primary inquiry. These two questions with their sub-questions are as follows:

1. How do state history museums incorporate and display LGBTQ+ histories in their collections and exhibits?
  1. What are the challenges, and what are the successes in collecting and displaying underrepresented histories?
  2. What does the exhibit planning process look like for an LGBTQ+ exhibit?
2. How do the public and members of the LGBTQ+ communities react to LGBTQ+ history and representation in a public state museum?
  1. Does the location of the exhibit at a state museum influence public perception?
  2. Do those in LGBTQ+ communities versus those outside the community receive the exhibit differently?

To decide how to answer these questions, I turned to other museum research projects that exhibited similar research inquiries to gain insight into how I might answer the questions at hand. Other University of Denver thesis papers such as *Lessons from*

*Controversy: Interpreting the Sand Creek Massacre in Colorado* (Hoadley 2020), *Whose Community Museum Is It? Collaboration Strategies and Identity Affirmation in the Amache Museum* (Huang 2019), and *Indigenous Curation at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science* (Strunk 2016) provided immense insight into how I could go about answering my research questions. Through consulting previous projects, I decided to pursue answers to these questions by utilizing museum ethnography and conducting an in-depth case study of the History Colorado Center's first-ever LGBTQ+ history exhibit, *Rainbows & Revolutions*. Additionally, I looked to the 2018 study and analysis of visitor engagement and response to the incorporation and display of LGBTQ+ history at the United Kingdom's National Trust. This research was conducted by Jocelyn Dodd, Sarah Plumb, Jennifer Bergevin and Richard Sandell, and utilized visitor interview, surveys, and response cards to understand the impact of displaying LGBTQ+ histories on the National Trust Visitors (Dodd et al. 2018). The data collected from this study provided me with an example of how to collect visitor responses to an exhibition and analyze these responses to draw conclusions about exhibit reception.

## **5.2 Museum Ethnography**

The concept of museum ethnography has been and is still being utilized by anthropologists interested in questioning colonialized structures within museum settings for decades, such as Anthony Shelton, Michael Ames, Christina Kreps, and more. Museum ethnography is a methodology that originated from the field of cultural anthropology and is applied by museum anthropologists who,

See museums as field sites for the investigation and analysis of museum workings on many levels from how knowledge is constructed and conveyed



through exhibitions to revealing underlying institutional power structures and organizational hierarchies,. (Kreps 2019, 40)

Additionally, museum ethnography differs from traditional ethnography inasmuch that it is more concerned with themes, issues, and images rather than one specific community or geographic area (Kreps 2019, 40). Through conducting a museum ethnographic study of the History Colorado Center and their exhibit *Rainbows & Revolutions* I aimed to produce an account of the exhibit development process as well as the public reception of the exhibit to better understand the practices and processes of cultural production and the larger role public history museums play in our society (Kreps 2019, 6). Utilizing this methodology urged me to consider the various power structures at hand within the institution and how they may impact the stories that are ultimately told.

### **5.3 Site Selection**

As the main component of any ethnography includes fieldwork and participant observation (Bernard 2018, 272), most of my research for this project took place in person at the History Colorado Center in Denver, Colorado, specifically within the Ballentine Gallery on the first floor of the museum. This research site is significant for my investigation due to the highly public nature of its setting. History Colorado is located in the Golden Triangle of Denver, situated among institutions such as the Denver Art Museum, the Clyfford Still Museum, and the Kirkland Museum of Fine and Decorative art. History Colorado differs from its neighbors because it is a state institution. As a state institution that is free to all children in Colorado, I was interested in understanding if this positionality influenced the reception to the exhibition in any way.

While the bulk of my research took place onsite at History Colorado either in the gallery, or in meeting rooms for exhibit planning and interviews, I also conducted a few interviews online via Zoom due to the interviewees not being available to meet in person.

#### **5.4 Data Collection Methodology**

This museum ethnography and case study of History, Colorado's *Rainbows & Revolutions*, consisted of a mixed methodology approach including participant observation of the collection and exhibition development process, online post-exhibit surveys for visitors, collection of exhibit attendance numbers, and finally, semi-structured interviews with staff and object donors. These various distinctive approaches worked together to offer me in-depth insight into many aspects of this exhibition's development and its reception, both publicly and by the staff who worked on the project directly and indirectly. While much of my research was interpretative and qualitative, including attending exhibition planning meetings, observing museum interactions, and conducting interviews, I was also able to include quantitative research through analysis of the responses to post-exhibit surveys and attendance numbers to this specific exhibition.

##### *Participant Observation*

One of the principal methodologies associated with museum ethnography is participant observation. In the sixth edition of *Research Methods in Anthropology*, H. Russel Bernard notes that "participant observation is the foundation of cultural anthropology. It involves getting close to people and making them comfortable enough...so that you can observe and record information about their lives" (Bernard 2018, 272). More specifically, for my research, I engaged as an observing participator

(Bernard 2018, 273) due to my insider access and knowledge of History Colorado resulting from my prior employment by them. My participant observation began unofficially during my time as an intern helping solicit donations to the collections starting in the Winter of 2020. This methodology continued through my attendance to exhibit preparation meetings throughout the Winter and Spring of 2022 and through attending the exhibition itself and various related programming to the exhibition during the exhibition's physical display. During all aspects of my participant observation, I took detailed notes. In addition, I wrote up my observations within a field journal so that I would be able to reference specific instances later on in my analysis process.

My initial involvement in History Colorado's LGBTQ+ collecting initiative in the Winter of 2020 allowed me to experience first-hand what it means to collect objects related to identities that have been historically and often purposely left out of museum collections and exhibition narratives. Throughout my time conducting historical research on Colorado's LGBTQ+ history and reaching out to possible donors, I connected with various individuals who donated to the collection and ultimately had their objects and related stories on display in the exhibition. This experience offered me integral insight into what it means for individuals to see themselves represented in a museum space, a topic I could explore more deeply while conducting interviews.

Once I received IRB approval in February of 2022, I was able to start attending exhibition preparation meetings for *Rainbows & Revolutions* onsite at History Colorado in a more official research capacity. Attendance at these meetings resulted in understanding in greater depth how the exhibition planning process unfolds at History

Colorado. More specifically, through my participant observation of these meetings, I was able to discern what challenges and successes arose during the process.

My final installment of participant observation occurred through attending the *Rainbows & Revolution* exhibit and observing associated programming. This aspect of participant observation took place over the Summer of 2022 and continued into the Fall of 2022. While my prior participant observation was more concerned with the development of the collection and exhibit, this aspect of observance focused more on the public reception of the exhibit. During this time, I sat outside the exhibition and observed how people interacted with the space. Additionally, I witnessed further reactions to the exhibition and understood the public's critiques and praises more deeply through the attendance of associated programming.

Initially, I also anticipated utilizing timing and tracking studies as a method for participant observation (Yalowitz and Bronnenkant 2009), but this was not possible due to the small space of the exhibition and not wanting to put visitors to the exhibit in an uncomfortable position. Moreover, I was most interested in how the exhibit came to be and how it was received by the larger public, using timing and tracking studies fell outside of my scope, as it is more concerned with how visitors interact with particular aspects of the exhibition space.

### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

I conducted semi-structured interviews to elaborate on the exhibit planning process and the experience of donating to the exhibit. I decided to utilize a semi-structured interview approach as it allowed me to be efficient with the time of my

participants but also gave space for the interviewees to cover topics they perceived as essential and for me to ask more specific follow-up questions (Bernard 2018, 165). These semi-structured interviews were conducted with current staff at the History Colorado Center and individuals who donated items to the LGBTQ+ collection. To prepare for these interviews, I created two interview guides, one for the staff of History Colorado and a second one for the object donors.

In total, I conducted seven interviews, five with History Colorado staff and two with object donors. These interviews gave insight into the process of collecting LGBTQ+ artifacts, exhibition and project funding, exhibit development, community engagement, and public reception of the project. Specifically, the staff interviews gave the staff members I observed during the exhibit planning process a chance to share with me in their own words what they saw as both challenges and successes to this project. In addition, the two donor interviews I conducted offered donors the opportunity to explain their experience donating to the collection and being represented in the exhibit.

The interviews ranged from thirty minutes to two hours and took place both onsite at the History Colorado Center and via Zoom. Each interview was recorded using my phone with the participants' permission. All related files were kept on a password-protected device under a password-protected account. As the interviewer for this project, I have trained in CITI training and anthropological research methods. All interview participants were sent a consent form that allowed them to remain anonymous if they wished, along with an email explaining the research project and why they were chosen. Upon receipt of the signed consent form, I worked with each participant to schedule a

meeting time in person or via Zoom. Participants' consent was also verbally confirmed at the beginning of each interview, and they were informed they could end the interview at any point. Finally, each participant was sent a typed interview transcript to ensure they felt comfortable with what was discussed.

### *Post-Exhibit Survey*

In order to gain more direct insight into the exhibition's public reception, I designed and conducted a post-exhibit survey for visitors over the age of eighteen to take upon exiting the gallery space. To develop the survey, I worked closely with public historian and former Exhibit Developer at History Colorado, Julie Peterson. Julie Peterson had designed various visitor insight surveys for prior exhibitions and reviewed my questions to ensure they met the institutional standards of History Colorado. The survey was made using Qualtrics and consisted of 23 questions in total. The survey was distributed via a quick response or QR code placed outside the gallery. Moreover, I physically conducted surveys a few days a week outside of the gallery via an iPad. Consent was confirmed for the surveys via an electronic form and signature before the participants filled out the questionnaire.

The survey began with a question asking if the participant was over 18. The survey used branching logic, where if the participant indicated they were younger than 18, the survey automatically closed out. The survey then presented the implied consent for online surveys form, where participants were informed about the nature of the survey and asked if they wanted to proceed. Besides the age and consent questions, participants could freely skip questions and were not forced to respond to proceed through the survey.

The survey included ratings-based multiple-choice and free-response questions designed to gauge the visitor's identity, the visitor's overall impression of the exhibition, and attitude toward the inclusion of LGBTQ+ history at a state-owned museum.

Multiple choice survey items included: "Please tell us which option most closely fits your reason for visiting the History Colorado Center today," with response options that included: "I came to the museum to specifically see the LGBTQ+ exhibit," "I didn't know about the LGBTQ+ exhibit but decided to visit while I was here," and "I knew about the LGBTQ+ exhibit, but it is just one part of my museum visit today." In addition, respondents were asked, "Before you visited the exhibit, how would you describe your general level of interest in learning about LGBTQ+ history in Colorado?" which they rated on a 1-3 scale ranging from "Not at all interested" to "Very interested." Respondents were also asked, "Please rate your Overall Experience with the LGBTQ+ History exhibit," which they rated on a 1-5 scale ranging from "Poor" to "Outstanding." To gauge respondents' views on LGBTQ+ history inclusion in history museums, the survey asked, "Please rate your agreement with the following statement: I believe LGBTQ+ history is important and should be included in museums," which was rated on a 1-7 scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree."

Free-response questions were included throughout the survey prompting participants to explain their responses to the multiple-choice questions, but also as stand-alone questions. Free response questions included items like: "Can you describe what drew you to see the LGBTQ+ History exhibit?", "Did the exhibit meet your expectations? Please describe why or why not?", "In the exhibit, what would you like to see more of?",

“In the exhibit, what would you like to see less of? “, “In your own words, what was the main message of the exhibition?”, “Please tell us one thing you saw in this exhibit that you didn’t know about before.” and “Is there anything we didn’t cover that you think is important for the museum to know about your visit or your thoughts about the LGBTQ+ History exhibit?”

The survey ended with several demographic questions, including sexual orientation, gender identity, age range, and ethnicity. The survey also included three questions about how often the respondent visits museums, if the respondent was a member of the History Colorado Center, and who the respondent visited the museum with that day. The complete post-exhibit survey is available in Appendix B. Despite the survey being longer than average, I collected 149 survey responses over the course of three months, 98 of which were complete and useable responses. These surveys supplemented my interpretation of the exhibition’s public reception with concrete insight into visitors’ thoughts and emotions surrounding the exhibit.

#### *Exhibit Attendance Count*

My final methodology and data source included collecting exhibit attendance numbers. When History Colorado employed me, one of my main jobs was collecting daily attendance numbers for each exhibit. Though I was not employed by History Colorado during the duration of *Rainbows & Revolutions*, they were kind enough to allow me access to the daily attendance counts, which are collected via a digital counter and recorded into an excel spreadsheet each morning before opening. The attendance numbers provided by History Colorado offer fascinating information regarding the



attendance of *Rainbows & Revolutions* versus other previous exhibits situated in that gallery space.

## **5.5 Research Populations**

As I utilized differing methodologies throughout this project's duration, I also had different research populations and samples for each method. Therefore, in the following section, I will highlight the corresponding research population for each of my methodologies involving such.

### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

As mentioned above, I had two groups of participants for the semi-structured interviews. Participants from both groups were over the age of 18 and were selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling, or judgment sampling, is a methodology in which a researcher chooses informants based on specific characteristics. In other terms, purposive sampling involves selecting specific participants intentionally rather than at random (Bernard 2018, 147). My first group consisted of individuals employed by the History Colorado Center who were either directly or indirectly involved with the collecting and planning process of the LGBTQ+ exhibit. I interviewed three members of the exhibit team as well as two employees associated with the executive level of the museum. The employees I interviewed consisted of both those belonging to the LGBTQ+ community and those who do not identify as a member of the community. For the object donor interviews, I reached out to 5 individuals who had donated to the collection and had objects that made it into the final exhibit. I chose those whose objects appeared in the exhibition as I was interested in hearing how they felt their stories had been represented.

Three of the five individuals I contacted responded, but ultimately only two were able to participate. These individuals identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community but vary significantly in age. Notably, both of the individuals I interviewed are white and therefore the donor interviews are not representative of the experiences of LGBTQ+ BIPOC individuals who donated to the collection. Though, I did reach out to members of the LGBTQ+ BIPOC community multiple times, unfortunately when it came time to schedule interviews, they were unresponsive.

#### *Post-Exhibit Survey*

For the surveys, my research population included individuals over 18 who visited the *Rainbows & Revolutions* exhibit in person at the History Colorado Center and opted to take the survey. This sample comprises anyone who decided to take the survey over the age of 18, those who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, and those who do not. Though data pertaining to the respondent's identity was collected to understand the visitors' demographics to the exhibit, no identifiable information was collected, and all survey participants were anonymous and will remain that way for privacy purposes.

## **5.6 Data Analysis**

### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

To analyze the semi-structured interview, I first began by completing typed transcriptions of each interview I conducted. Creating transcriptions allowed me to engage in depth with each interview and carefully read through responses to each question I posed. Once I read through and transcribed each interview, I began to compile a codebook of emerging themes I identified. After establishing the themes I wanted to

code for, I utilized the software NVIVO to carefully code each interview. Through coding, I recognized emergent themes throughout the interviews regarding collection practices, exhibition preparation, and response from staff members and donors to the exhibition. In addition, thematic coding with NVIVO allowed me to see visual representations of how often each theme was discussed and compare how often specific topics were discussed and in what manner between each interview.

### *Post-Exhibit Survey*

For analyzing my responses to the post-exhibit survey, I first began by exporting and cleaning the data. The survey data was exported from Qualtrics. Data was cleaned in Microsoft Excel. Cleaning the data involved examining each response and evaluating which survey responses were usable. Of the 149 surveys I collected, nine were started by individuals under the age of 18. When they identified their age, the survey automatically ended. Though they were included in the overall count, these surveys contained no information, so these responses were removed. Additionally, of the 138 surveys started by individuals over the age of 18, 41 surveys were incomplete, resulting in 98 complete surveys. A range of 1-4 individuals completed all the exhibit-specific survey items but skipped some or all of the demographic questions.

The clean data was analyzed and visualized in Excel. For the demographic and other multiple-choice ratings-based questions, I calculated the frequency of each response and visually represented these frequencies using bar graphs. Additionally, for the Likert-scale based questions about visitor interest in the exhibit's content and their overall experience of the exhibit, I conducted two independent samples t-tests to assess if there

were differences in these ratings between LGBTQ+ identified respondents and non-LGBTQ+ identified respondents. Finally, for the survey free response questions, I hand-coded the free responses to understand emergent themes of attitudes toward the exhibition from the public.

### *Participant Observation*

For analyzing the data collected from participant observation, including attending exhibit prep meetings, observation outside the exhibit, and attending associated programming, I turned to my field journal. Like the semi-structured interviews, I conducted a thematic analysis of my notes to identify emerging themes I identified during my observations. I then compared these observations to see how they aligned or misaligned with the information I gathered through my semi-structured interviews.

## **5.7 Ethical Considerations and Positionality**

The primary ethical consideration within my work was that due to the complicated history of the LGBTQ+ community, it was possible that some community members may have experienced distress when discussing such topics. To combat this possibility, I supplied all my interview and survey participants with local Denver LGBTQ+ resources they could reach out to if they did experience this.

Another consideration overlaps with my usage of critical intersectional theory. When working with the LGBTQ+ community, one must always consider that the LGBTQ+ community is highly diverse, and members of the community can embody multiple intersections of identity. Therefore, it is integral to my research to consider how identities overlap within our community. In order to acknowledge the intersectionality of

this community, I have worked to avoid sweeping generalizations in discussing the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community, as not all LGBTQ+ individuals experience life the same way.

Finally, I want to discuss my positionality concerning this research. I identify as a white, cis-gendered, lesbian woman. In researching the representation of a community, I belong to, I acknowledge that a prominent aspect of my work is motivated by my own interest, passion, and concern for the representation of my community. I grew up in North Carolina and did not encounter any representations of myself when I visited museums. I believe accurate representation is an integral aspect for individuals to situate themselves within the world they live. I believe having access to and seeing reflections of your own identity, specifically at institutions such as state history museums can assist in combating negative self-image and facilitate self and societal acceptance. Additionally, considering I was an employee of the History Colorado Center for two years and worked extremely closely with current employees on this project and exhibit, I hold an insider position at the museum. This insider position allowed me to be privy to information that may not be available to the public or evident from the outside.

To mitigate biases that my relationship with History Colorado may have affected in this research, I stepped back from the project as a volunteer once I received IRB approval. I then shifted my involvement to that of observer and researcher. Due to my positionality as an insider of the History Colorado Center and a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I strived to remain aware of any internal biases I held while working on the project and conducting research.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge that I am not only an academic who studies museums but that I work in museums as well. Therefore my research aims to contribute to a larger conversation surrounding the importance of representation and meaning-making in cultural center spaces.

## **Chapter 6 : Results, Findings, and Analysis**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The research questions I set out to examine for this project, as stated in the research design and methodology section, revolved around not only the incorporation, and display of LGBTQ+ histories at a state history museum but also the overall public reception and attitudes towards the exhibition. Through my various methods of research and data collection, I was able to identify both the challenges and successes that were apparent during the processes of collecting, incorporating, and displaying LGBTQ+ history at the History Colorado Center as well as gain an understanding of internal perceptions of the exhibit process and reception of the exhibit. In addition, my field notes and participant observation during the collecting, exhibit planning process, and attendance at the exhibition helped supplement my findings related to the semi-structured interviews and survey data throughout this chapter. Furthermore, the results of my post-exhibit survey highlight that despite challenges that arose during the process, the public was highly receptive to the display of LGBTQ+ history while offering specific constructive criticism on how the exhibit could be improved.

Throughout this chapter, I will present and summarize the results of my research and analysis of said results. I begin with sharing and analyzing my interview data with five staff members at History Colorado to offer an overview of the process of collecting

for this project, discussing challenges and successes as identified in my semi-structured interviews.

Next, I will share several challenges and successes in the exhibition preparation and planning process, as discussed in my semi-structured interviews with staff members at History Colorado. Following this, I will discuss various perceptions of community collaboration and how it manifested within this exhibition according to the staff. Finally, I offer a case study of a specific challenge that arose during the exhibit planning process regarding the display of an object that was perceived by some to be controversial.

In the subsequent section, I shift away from the perspectives of History Colorado staff and towards the experiences of those who donated their objects to the collection and that were displayed in the final exhibition. These findings are derived from my semi-structured interviews with object donors.

In addition to summarizing the collection and exhibit development processes and offering perspectives on the museum object donor experience, I will analyze the exhibition's overall internal and public reception at History Colorado using multiple methods, including staff interviews, attendance data, and audience surveys. This final section offers significant insights into the reception of the History Colorado Center's *Rainbows & Revolutions* exhibition.

## **6.2 Challenges and Successes to Collecting LGBTQ+ History**

### *Staff Perceptions of Challenges*

When the Gill Foundation decided to fund History Colorado's LGBTQ+ history exhibit, though History Colorado already held a small collection of LGBTQ+ related and



categorized objects beforehand, the museum first needed to build a more extensive collection if they were to have an entire exhibition. When cultural institutions, such as History Colorado, decide to focus collecting initiatives on communities that have been historically silenced and ignored by museums, it is not always a straightforward task. Contemporary collecting of marginalized histories can result in unique challenges that may not appear evident from the start (Crooke 2006). During my semi-structured staff interviews at History Colorado, though not all of my participants were directly involved with the collecting process, I asked each contributor what they viewed as specific hindrances to collecting LGBTQ+ history at Colorado's state history museum.

As mentioned above, when museums and other cultural institutions turn their interest towards collecting and documenting marginalized communities that museums have historically left behind, the institutions must work to gain the trust of these communities. According to the American Alliance of Museums LGBTQ+ Alliance's 2016 Welcoming Guidelines for Museums, to properly care for and collect materials relating to historically marginalized LGBTQ+ populations, institutions must have a clear understanding that LGBTQ+ individuals "have been long excluded from open participation in majority institutions like museums and historical societies and therefore may not have a well-developed trust in the intent of the organization," (Leitch et al. 2016, 141). The barriers and difficulties around establishing trust was one of the most prominent emerging themes that came to the surface while coding information relating to the challenges of collecting LGBTQ+ objects and histories for the History Colorado Center.

Curator, Aaron Marcus, explained how trust was challenging to gain especially considering the initial attempts to connect with the LGBTQ+ community that the museum partook in during 2015 before the potential exhibition was canceled.

It was really tough to get out into those marginalized communities and gain their trust after decades of History Colorado not wanting their stories. And to go back to 2015 - when I started that exhibit in 2015 when that was just cut off, it was like the entire LGBTQ+ community pretty much washed their hands of History Colorado. So during the process of collecting, I was also trying to rebuild all these relationships that were there in 2015. And there was so much excitement in 2015, I was working directly with the [LGBTQ+] Center and they were giving me anything I needed to make that happen. And then to have it just end like it did. It was over two years of trying to build back these relationships. You know, a lot of them were rebuilt, but there were a lot that weren't also. (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

This quote illustrates that institutions' already fraught relationships with marginalized communities can be complicated further by external factors, like funding, that can ultimately influence institutional decision-making around what collections and exhibitions are prioritized. By offering a glimpse of hope into representation and inclusion in the museum space in 2015 that was then, unfortunately, rescinded, History

Colorado, while likely unintentional, created a more difficult path towards contemporary collecting of LGBTQ+ histories for Aaron Marcus and his team.

Due to the overall lack of trust that History Colorado experienced, it was increasingly difficult for them to facilitate the donation of objects from their donors or, in more extreme situations, even locate individuals who could or wanted to donate objects. One History Colorado team member discussed this specific challenge during my interview with them.

[Some individuals] were immediately hostile - I wouldn't say hostile, that is an unfair way to paint that. They were skeptical. They were hesitant and they were very much like 'we're going to play hardball to get the resources our community needs' and I respect that immensely. (Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

Additionally, this quote showcases a more significant issue of trust that was faced during the collecting process for this project. History Colorado exists as an agency of the State of Colorado. This very public and well-known association introduced a second level of the lack of trust between LGBTQ+ object donors and History Colorado. Museums that work to incorporate and showcase LGBTQ+ histories must also have a profound understanding of the past and current legal conditions associated with the LGBTQ+ population they are striving to serve (Leitch et al. 2016). Though the state of Colorado has made many strides regarding the acceptance of and protections in place for LGBTQ+

populations, this has not always been the case. Furthermore, when specific intersections of a community, or a community as a whole, have been historically discriminated against by the state's laws, it follows that this community may not feel confident in trusting a state agency to be the safe-keepers of their history. One team member discussed this concept of safety, noting that:

It's hard because so many [transgender people] die so young. And so we leave what people would think is such a short, small footprint, and you know, different communities collect histories in different ways. But it was definitely hard to find people [to donate to the collection] because it was hard to find people who were... *[interviewee pauses]* it was hard to push in where people are very dodgy - And I don't mean dodgy in a flaky way. I mean, dodgy in like, 'I need to stay out of things for my own personal safety.' (Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

Though the trust History Colorado has with the LGBTQ+ community is precarious and in need of much repair, the collecting team was still able to locate and speak with many individuals and community groups interested in sharing their history. That being considered, though there was some level of trust in donating their objects, a few individuals brought up reoccurring concerns with trust in how their objects would be interpreted and displayed within the museum setting and, more specifically, within an exhibition funded by Tim Gill, a white and cis-gendered gay man. Aaron Marcus noted

how in speaking with a donor during the collecting process, they expressed specific concerns regarding donating their objects to be on display in the exhibition as they were worried the exhibit would be one that reflected a singular narrative. The donor expressed a sentiment along the lines of, “I don’t want this exhibit to look like Tim Gill” (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022). This sentiment, which various donors reiterated throughout the collecting process, directly relates to another central theme regarding the challenges of the collection process that I identified in my interviews.

A second emerging theme that came up frequently as a challenge during the initial collecting process focused on the concept of intersectionality and varying identities within the LGBTQ+ community. Though there are many commonalities, shared experiences, and collective histories among the LGBTQ+ community, due to the vast range of intersections of identities that encompass the community, when the outreach to donors and collecting process becomes the responsibility of one individual with a specific identity, it can prove challenging for that individual to connect with people of diverse LGBTQ+ identities. Aaron Marcus spoke to the challenges presented by the intersectionality of the community concerning the collecting process during our interview.

Another struggle with the collecting is that the LGBTQ+ community is so segregated in itself. Every one of those letters – L meaning lesbian, G meaning gay, B for bisexual, T for transgender. Q for queer, and the + sign as kind of a

catch all...it was very hard for me as a gay man – and I will say this a white gay male, no less to reach out to some of these communities. (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

When only one identity of the community is involved in seeking out objects and stories for the collection, it naturally follows that the collection will continue to have significant gaps regarding the history of the community. The history and material heritage that is collected will be skewed towards belonging to those that share the identity of the curator, and this was indeed the case for History Colorado. Though Aaron Marcus eventually had a team of interns and volunteers helping him with soliciting objects for the collection and the exhibition that reflected more diversity along LGBTQ+ specific identities, there remained a lack of BIPOC individuals engaged in the collecting process. Another team member spoke about this lack of intersectionality and diverse representation among staff and how it affected the museum collecting, stating that:

We needed a curator for the L, the G, the B, the T and one for each ethnicity. Because once you start getting into the spectrum of LGBT politics, it's impossible not to find somebody who isn't marginalized and somebody who isn't pushed to the side in favor of more "respectable" people. (Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

Moreover, despite increasing the representation of multiple LGBTQ+ identities on the collection teams, the heterogeneity of the LGBTQ+ community was still a point of tension during the collecting process, not only for donors but for staff participating in outreach. For example, one team member had to navigate explicit invalidation regarding their gender identity while working with objects from the lesbian feminist movements of the 1970s and their respective donors. The team member discussed how difficult it was to collect and catalog these objects while having a professional relationship of trust with the donors:

I do remember coming across this thing [from the] lesbians conference welcome packet in big bold letters, “NO TRANSSEXUALS” ...And it’s this bio essentialist very TERF [trans exclusive radical feminist] language, but I also... I took great care not to take those words as I probably take them from like, a JK Rowling. Because, it was a different time, labels didn’t exist as much.... And even now, we are continually criticizing second-wave feminism’s intersectionality. But it did always hit me a little sideways, that I kept finding evidence of these vibrant trans women in the community who were just about two paces to the left of every major development in the queer struggle in Colorado. And it’s kind of disheartening...which is hard when you’re collecting, and you are trying to advocate for your own [and your communities] existence retroactively. But you’re also trying to keep that good relationship between you

and the person you're collecting from. (Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

This team member's invalidating experiences while collecting LGBTQ+ histories demonstrates how for some individuals community is not always a positive experience. When museums aim to represent the nuanced histories of intersectional groups such as the LGBTQ+ community, "the complexity of past experiences must be acknowledged, as must the diversity that exists amongst people and within places" (Crooke 2006, 183). The topic of intersectionality, specific to *Rainbows & Revolutions*, was not just a theme in the collections process but a reoccurring theme throughout staff interviews, donor interviews, and visitor survey responses regarding all aspects of the exhibit. The influence and importance of this intersectionality will be further discussed throughout this chapter.

In addition to personal and community factors, as discussed above, various external factors beyond the control of any staff or donors influenced the collections process at History Colorado – the most notable of which is COVID-19. Aaron Marcus accepted his position as the Tim Gill Foundation Associate Curator of LGBTQ+ History in the fall of 2019, and his appointment, along with the collecting initiative and exhibition, was announced a few months later in February of 2020, just one month before the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Though Aaron Marcus experienced some initial interest from object donors after his position was announced, the COVID-19 lockdowns hindered his ability to connect with diverse communities and physically collect objects. Likewise, it restricted the ways in which



Marcus could safely interact with potential donors, especially those that belonged to at-risk groups due to their age and health conditions. Marcus highlighted the difficulties COVID-19 restrictions put on the collecting effort and how those impacts were still felt once they were lifted.

COVID-19 was happening, and I did as much as I could. But I would have found a way to hold more community events and get a lot of people together. Again, we were dealing with COVID...if I could go back, I probably would have approached it differently and reached out to a lot more people... But honestly once the COVID restrictions lifted up, I was buried in the items I brought in which still had to be processed and catalogued before they can even get in the exhibit. (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

Another team member noted that while the project was a two-year process, the first year was dedicated to collecting LGBTQ+ materials. Unfortunately, that entire first year was done during the COVID-19 lockdown, which “completely hampered collecting” (Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022).

One direct result of the hindrance of COVID-19 on the collecting process was reflected in the overrepresentation of Denver-specific LGBTQ+ history and the overall lack of statewide LGBTQ+ histories. The majority of interviews I conducted with staff addressed this hindrance regarding the lack of ability to collect statewide materials in some way.

You know, one impact, I will say that COVID-19 did have was on the state outreach, I wasn't able to travel the state like I should have....as far as individual stories in other regions of the state, those are a little bit lacking, I would say. (Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

COVID, obviously complicated the statewide collecting, or just the collecting window in general. (Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022)

But we also were doing this work [collecting] during the height of COVID, which made that [state outreach] harder. (Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

Despite the challenges that COVID-19 presented in collecting diverse LGBTQ+ stories for the museum, one small benefit that did emerge from the time during lockdown was that Aaron was able to connect with donors he had a relationship with already on a deeper level, and they were allowed more time to go through their possible donations.

Being locked down in COVID gave a lot of these donor's time to go through their attics and basements and crawlspaces. I mentioned crawl spaces, because one guy actually did go through his crawlspace for the stuff he donated. Anyhow, so then once the restrictions were easing up, and I could actually go out and see people to

get to meet them – I had a lot of donations already lined up. (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

Though the examples and emerging themes listed above concerning resources, community trust, intersectionality, and the global pandemic are by no means an exhaustive representation of every challenge that History Colorado faced during the time focused on collecting LGBTQ+ materials for their collection and exhibition, the quotes and context above highlight some of the substantial challenges that staff identified and perceived during this time.

#### *Staff Perceptions of Successes*

In addition to asking the staff I interviewed to reflect on the challenges of the collecting process, I also asked them to highlight what they perceived as some of the more successful moments and approaches while seeking donations to History Colorado's collection. In coding the responses and overall interviews regarding the successes of the collecting process, one central theme emerged: the idea of excitement from the LGBTQ+ community in having the opportunity to share and work to document their stories. Aaron Marcus detailed one moving example explaining the first donation he received while collecting.

Going back to the original collecting, most people that contacted me were excited about donating something. The very, very first item I brought in is a poster from a bar that used to be here called 1942, it was at 1942 Broadway. And the guy who

brought it in, it was his partner's poster who passed away from AIDS. And so this poster meant a lot to him. His neighbor, who was a young girl, kind of like his niece is how he always thought of her, she saw the article in the *Denverite* I did and told him about it. So, then he contacted me about this poster, because since it was his partner's, and he met his partner the love of his life at this bar, he wanted it to be taken care of. And so, I said, 'Yeah, if you donate it here, it'll be taken care of and stored so that it will last hundreds of years.' And so, in him donating that when he was signing the paperwork...So when they sign it...It's not completely final at that point. But it's pretty final at that point. As he signed it, he cried. It was so emotional for him. And so I mean, that was incredible. (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

Executive Director of History Colorado, Dawn DiPrince, and Chief Creative Officer Jason Hanson, though both were not actively involved in the collecting process shared their perceptions of responses from the LGBTQ+ community during that time.

DD: I would say from the community, I heard a lot of, 'Oh my gosh, I'm so excited that History Colorado's doing this'. It felt super important to people I know. I mean, sometimes it's like you sort of live in your own zone. So in my mind, I just don't think I personally grasped what a big deal this was...I heard from, people who are close to me in the LGBT community, how meaningful this was like, [and] I get that. But it was sort of surprising to me. I mean, I knew

they'd be glad we were doing it. But I didn't realize how, meaningful it would be to them. (Dawn DiPrince, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

JH: My perspective on the collecting initiative is that it expanded really nicely in concentric circles. And there's always this moment at the beginning where it feels like it's going too slow. And then it picks up a lot of momentum. And by the end, you're like, oh, no, it's, we have to like, stop, and focus on the exhibit. (Jason Hanson, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022)

By and large, people want their story represented at the state institution. And while there may initially be some resistance or reluctance, once they understand that we are acting in good faith, most people are really willing to work with us and might even be excited by the prospect of adding, you know, their artifacts, their stories to what amounts to Colorado's permanent historical record. I mean, that is what we do. When we talk about the collection, we're talking about the historic record...But my perspective is, is that we typically, I don't want to overemphasize some of those challenges. Because what I see is typically, we are able to overcome them, we're acting in good faith. (Jason Hanson, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022)

However, this excitement was not universally shared by all members of Colorado's LGBTQ+ community that were contacted about donating objects to the collection. In an interview, one staff member recalled assorted reactions from potential donors.

While collecting we had a lot of mixed responses from people from a lot of different angles, from you know, the community we had... [Some donors] were ecstatic to be in a museum whatsoever. The Big Mama Rag women, they just wanted to sit there for hours and talk to you. I love that about them... And they told you stories for a lifetime. I mean we had close to four hours of an oral history recorded with them... There were quite a few people in the community, who I would say were just like, wonderfully ecstatic that we were doing the stuff that we could, that we were saying this, and that we were collecting from them... So, you know, the community had two minds... and a lot of that can be colored by race.

(Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

This interviewee echoed the critical theme of intersectionality, which was extensively discussed in the challenges faced during the collections process. The assumption that most people will enthusiastically overcome skepticism regarding the museum's intentions is one that lacks a deeper critical awareness of historic and ongoing exclusions that BIPOC members of the LGBTQ+ community to a greater extent than their white counterparts.

Overall, regarding staff perceptions of the collecting process for the exhibition *Rainbows & Revolutions*, more challenges were highlighted in interviews than successes. This is not to say that expanding the LGBTQ+ collections at History Colorado was unsuccessful. During our interview, Aaron Marcus noted that when he first accepted the position in 2019, he began by searching the museum database to identify how many objects were currently cataloged as LGBTQ+ related and found approximately 94 objects. While this categorization is not a direct translation or representation of how many LGBTQ+ related objects were actually in the collection, by the time of our interview in July of 2022, Marcus noted there were now over 500 objects cataloged as relating to LGBTQ+ history and that they still had many more to catalog and process. The collection is likely not as thorough, comprehensive, or representative of the varying intersections of LGBTQ+ history here in Colorado as it could be. However, the existence of, and the sheer addition of, over 400 objects to the state's public collection is a massive accomplishment in its own right.

### **6.3 Exhibit Development of *Rainbows & Revolutions***

During the second year of Aaron Marcus' position as the Associate Curator of LGBTQ+ history, he was to focus on putting together an exhibit that would tell the history of Colorado's LGBTQ+ community statewide. Like any exhibition planning process at most museums, many challenges and successes arose. One of my main research questions for this project was understanding how the museum would plan an exhibition to tell the story of an inherently diverse and heterogeneous community. Throughout this section, I begin by giving a brief overview of the exhibit planning

process for this specific exhibition at History Colorado. This information derives from participant observation, field journal notes I kept during exhibit planning meetings, and guidance from staff interviews. After providing this context, I then turn to my interviews with various staff members involved with the planning process to understand what they perceived as the challenges and successes throughout this time. Finally, I end this section by offering a case study of a specific challenge faced by the staff during the planning process.

### *Exhibit Planning Process Overview*

When Aaron Marcus' position was announced, the museum decided that the LGBTQ+ history exhibition he was to curate would open in June of 2022 to coincide with Pride month. Additionally, it was decided that the exhibition would be on display in the Ballantine Gallery, which I discussed earlier is a newer space at History Colorado dedicated to highlighting "niche stories in collaboration with community groups with whom they have never partnered" (Sealover 2020). Though there were prior meetings and discussions regarding exhibition planning for this exhibit, I received my IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, so around this time is when I officially began to attend meetings and observe the process holding the role of researcher and participant observer. Though I have some information regarding the process before February, I offer a condensed overview of the process of exhibition development from the beginning of February to when the exhibition opened in June. This overview does not highlight or discuss specific challenges faced; its purpose is to provide



context to the process. The section to follow this will highlight the challenges and successes.

At the start of February 2022, the official exhibition planning process began for the exhibit, later known as *Rainbows & Revolutions*, approximately five months before it was slated to open. This official planning consisted of weekly exhibition meetings that would take place each Thursday. The staff at these meetings typically consisted of Aaron Marcus, the curator; Julie Peterson, the exhibition developer assigned to the project; and Soleil Hanberry-Lizzi, a guest services associate at the museum who worked closely on the collecting process and continued to volunteer on the project during her spare time. Occasionally, others would be present at the meetings, including two interns that Aaron was able to bring on to the project, the then Director of the Exhibitions department, various employees from the Design and Production department, and very rarely those on the executive level at the museum, including Jason Hanson the Chief Creative Officer. Though this is around the time when the exhibition planning officially started, it is essential to note that Aaron Marcus had already taken the initiative to begin drafting an objects list as well as rough ideas of floor plans for the exhibit and had shared his ideas with Julie Peterson as well as the Design and Production team.

The first exhibition meeting I attended focused on staff involved in gaining a better understanding of the overall goals and narrative of the content that the team had in mind. To visualize this, Julie Peterson brought large sheets of paper to this meeting that each had two ends of a spectrum. The staff then placed stickers along the spectrums to

identify where they believed this exhibition should fall between two opposing sides (see Figure 6.1).

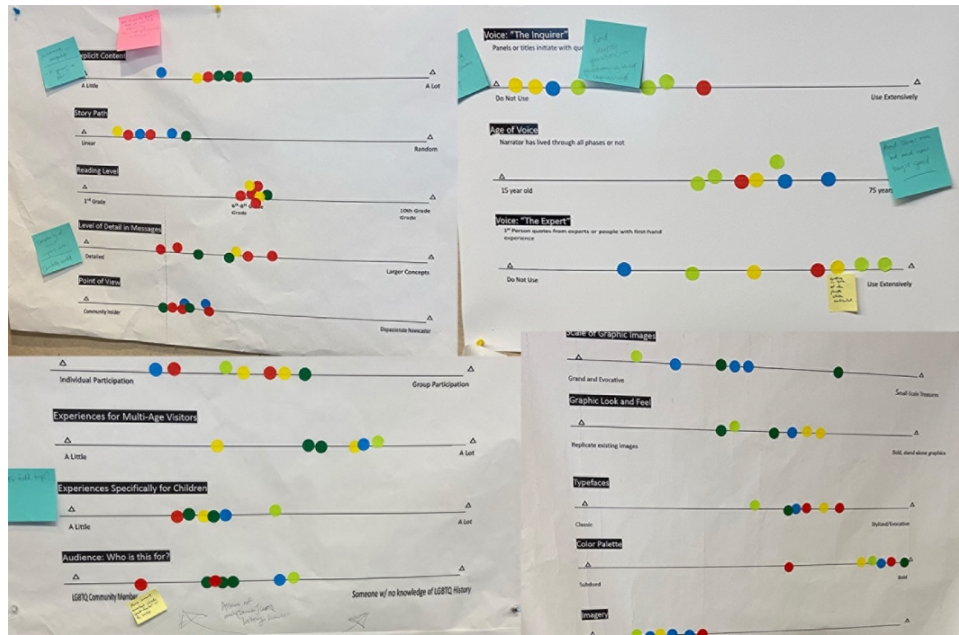


Figure 6.1: Exhibit Slider Scales (Photographs by Madeline Ohaus, February 2022).

This activity offered insights into the exhibit’s goals and served as a starting point for what the months leading up to the opening would be focused on. For example, most of the staff hoped this exhibition would be from a community insider point of view and that the exhibition would be both for the LGBTQ+ community and those outside the community. Additionally, it provided an understanding of the desired design aesthetic of the exhibit. The following meetings during February were utilized to confirm the general layout of the exhibition and further discuss the objects that would be on display. During this time, the decision to focus on a layout that separated objects and stories by decades was defined. Additionally, during February, the opening date was moved up to late May

due to conflicts regarding a June opening with the Gil Foundation, which added extra pressure on the limited staff working on the project.

The meetings during March mainly focused on understanding the big themes of the exhibition, deciding on an exhibition name so that promotional materials could commence, finally beginning the work on exhibition labels, and ongoing debates between the curator and the Design and Production department about the physical layout and the design of the exhibition. Most notably, in March is when Chief Creative Officer Jason Hanson made the executive decision that there would be a timeline of LGBTQ+ history on the walls of the exhibit. This somewhat last-minute and controversial decision required the exhibit team, mainly Julie Peterson and Aaron Marcus, to spend most of their time conducting photo research and deciding what would be included within the timeline.

The following month of planning, April, consisted of the teams and the staff involved agreeing on a finalized exhibition layout (see Figure 6.2), producing a logo and promotional materials, beginning to wrap up labels for the exhibition, and making final decisions about what objects would be included, and discussing more specific details of the display and content. Additionally, during April, it was officially decided the exhibition opening would be pushed back to the beginning of June, as it would not be ready to display by the end of May. This later opening date allowed the exhibits team to finalize details and gave Design and Production more time, seeing as History Colorado physically constructs the majority of their exhibits in-house.



 Figure 6.2: 3D Rendering of Rainbows & Revolutions (Photo provided by Design and Production team at the History Colorado Center)

May was the final month of exhibit planning prep, with the official opening date now set as June 4<sup>th</sup>. This month focused on the actual build-out of the exhibition by Design and Production, finalizing style choices, and preparing objects that had been approved for the exhibition for display. The exhibition team and Design and Production worked on the installation until the night before the exhibit opened. *Rainbows & Revolutions*, located in the Ballantine Gallery at the History Colorado Center, officially opened to the public on June 4th, 2022 (see Figure 6.3).



Figure 6.3: Rainbows & Revolutions on opening morning. (Photograph by Madeline Ohaus, June 4th, 2022.)

### *Time, Resources, and Internal Support*

Throughout the exhibition planning process for *Rainbows & Revolutions*, the team encountered various challenges discussed frequently during the semi-structured interviews I conducted. Some of the challenges confronted fit into themes regarding a lack of internal institutional support resulting in an overall lack of time for development.

The first challenge I want to highlight is a lack of internal institutional support as perceived by exhibition team members, which ultimately resulted in a lack of time for the overall process. Throughout the time leading up to the planning process, Aaron Marcus stated that he had very minimal support from any other full-time staff at History Colorado. As a result, the unofficial exhibition team that he initially assembled consisted of himself, two interns, and two volunteers. Furthermore, he highlighted during his interview how he felt there was an overall lack of urgency around the exhibition from his fellow staff members at the institution.

I felt here that no one seemed to really care what I was doing. Steve Turner, the executive director at the time, you know, he told me when we were negotiating this position, that he would be really involved and get me in touch with a lot of people... and it didn't happen. I think I might have talked to him twice after I got the position, just very briefly. And then he moved on to another position at another location, not within the state...Yeah. Anyway, so no, I didn't feel like I had the support. (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

Despite this feeling of an overall lack of support in the project, Aaron Marcus continuously attempted to get the institutional support he needed to start the processes beyond six months before the exhibit was slated to open.

I really tried to get this process going well over a year [before the exhibit opened], and it wasn't happening. And unfortunately, I'm not sure why that is.... But I was trying, I was really trying to get this going long before because I mean, it takes a good two years to plan an exhibit from idea to fabrication. So when I wasn't getting anywhere, I went higher and higher and still wasn't getting anywhere. So honestly, this exhibit started towards the end of January 2022 less than six months before the exhibit opening on June 4, 2022. (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

Marcus explained how perhaps this lack of internal support came from the decided location of the exhibition being the Ballantine Gallery as opposed to a more well-established and prioritized gallery space within the museum. There is a general skepticism regarding the function and purpose of the Ballantine Gallery and its corresponding exhibitions by the staff at the museum. Dawn DiPrince, History Colorado's Executive Director, noted during her interview how even though the Ballantine was initially established as a community-focused gallery space, the institution is "still trying to figure out exactly what that means" (Dawn DiPrince, Unpublished Interview Transcript July 2022). Aaron explained how the uncertainty about the space possibly affected the development of the exhibit during his interview, noting that:

The Ballantine Gallery, which is where this exhibit is being shown... is meant for really quick turnaround community-based exhibits. They're up for about three months, you tear them down in less than a week you put the next one up in less than a week. And this exhibit was not going to be like that... I had very strong feelings on what I wanted it to be, what I wanted it to look like, what should be included in it. And I got a lot of pushback from a lot of people about that. And it was kind of it was challenging, I'll say through a lot of that. But again, I feel like it's an internal perception that needs to change about that space if we're going to start having more exhibits in the Ballantine gallery that are going to be up longer than three months. (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

In this sense, the internal perception among staff at History Colorado regarding the overall importance of exhibitions developed for the Ballantine Gallery, as well as what the appropriate timeline for their development may be, likely directly heightened the lack of support or serious attention overall focused on the LGBTQ+ history exhibition. Moreover, the former Gallery Manager for the Ballantine Gallery resigned in late fall of 2021, and History Colorado chose not to fill their position after they left. This decision not to have a dedicated manager for the space may have further contributed to the perceived lack of importance of the Ballantine Gallery within the larger museum setting. Additionally, this decision led to the management of the gallery space falling into the hands of various employees across the institution on top of their actual obligations of their positions. The lack of explicit, formal management of the gallery space contributed to the overall deficiency of support the exhibition received during its development. Due to this absence of management, it was not until late January that Julie Peterson was assigned to the project as the Lead Exhibit Developer, as she outlined in her interview.

When the gallery manager for the Ballantine gallery left, it was sort of unclear who and how the projects slated for that gallery would be managed...It eventually became logical that I, as an exhibit developer would step in. But that meant that I didn't get involved until, you know, kind of later than we would normally have an exhibit developer. So I think that was sort of a challenge of like me getting up to speed on what had already been done... Coming in kind of later in the project was a little bit of playing catch up and trying to – it just felt kind of behind, which I



don't think is unique to this project. This happens all the time with exhibits, no matter how carefully we manage the schedule. It almost always goes awry. (Julie Peterson, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

It is important to note how Julie Peterson acknowledges that the lack of internal support and overall time to plan the exhibition may not be specific to this project but rather a more significant institutional issue regarding exhibition planning at History Colorado. In this specific case, with the addition of Julie Peterson to the exhibition team, Aaron Marcus felt he was receiving some of the internal support he needed to ensure the exhibition had enough time to be adequately planned before its opening. However, the pressure of time was still present throughout.

Julie Peterson was assigned to this exhibit as an Exhibit developer. And I give her credit for being kind of the project manager also because she kept everything in line, which I really appreciate. So it went super quick. I mean, from those first meetings, at the end of January, we were still talking about the exhibit design, when March came around. I mean, the exhibits opening in two months now two and a half months, and it was getting very stressful there for a while. So again, this isn't typically a way an exhibit is planned at all. I mean, a lot of this was on the fly. (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

There were varied perspectives about this lack of support between the staff and the executive level of the museum. While curatorial and exhibition staff who were part of the early planning stages felt that receiving formal investment for this exhibition from higher-up departments within the museum was challenging, this sentiment was not ubiquitous throughout. For example, the Chief Creative Officer, Jason Hanson, stated the following interpretation surrounding the early formalization of the *Rainbows & Revolutions* planning process.

I think one of the principal roles I played is, in getting that process moving, I felt like we were actually a little behind the curve when we started the exhibit development. And so I really pushed. This organization does a lot. And so people always have a lot on their plate. It can be hard to – even if they see that it’s coming and needs attention – it can be hard to actually get there. And so I think one of the contributions is Aaron and I started talking about we need to create the space to start the planning process. And I think that happened not a moment too soon. And there’s never I’ve never worked on an exhibit that felt like it had an adequate amount of development time. So I don’t think that because it felt rushed that it didn’t have enough. It just we needed to start when we did that. (Jason Hanson, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022)

The above quote may indicate a disconnect between History Colorado’s executive and non-executive staff. While two staff members noted that they felt a lack of internal

support or urgency around the process, making multiple attempts to set up formalized meetings with assistance from the executive level, it appears here that staff at the executive level perceived the lack of urgency as being a result of those directly involved in the process at the non-executive level.

Despite the discrepancies between staff members regarding the reasons behind the exhibition planning process being delayed in its starting, it was a common theme throughout my interviews that this exhibition planning process did not receive the appropriate amount of time needed overall. However, the exhibition did successfully open to the public on the planned date of June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022; though multiple of my interviewees noted how they had to work overtime and up until the last minute to ensure everything was in place for the opening. For example, Aaron Marcus noted that artifact cases were not built until the Wednesday before the opening. In addition, the behind-schedule installation process required employees to work until 9:00 pm the Friday night before the exhibition opened (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022).

#### *Barriers to Community Collaboration*

The inadequate time allocation surrounding the development of the exhibit also resulted in highly restricted opportunities for collaborating with the wider LGBTQ+ community in Denver as well as statewide. When considering the role of collaboration in this exhibition, it is integral to note that while the exhibition was chosen to be displayed in a gallery space promoted by History Colorado to be one of community collaboration

and shared authority, no community advisory board was assembled for the planning and development of this exhibition.

The emergence of community advisory boards as an integral part of the exhibition planning process is a practice not specific to History Colorado but rather a more significant trend within museums across the world towards “increased awareness of the importance of source communities’ expertise, knowledge, and rights to influence – even control – the way their heritage is cared for and represented... shift[ing] away from the curator as a lone expert” (Onciul 2018, 159). A community advisory board is typically constructed from members of the public, outside of museum staff, that identify within the community that is to be represented in the museum walls. This group is typically assembled in the earlier stages of the planning process and works to ensure that diverse perspectives are included throughout the process while offering the museum staff invaluable insights, critique, and feedback regarding how the public may receive representations as constructed by the museum. Furthermore, the inclusion of a community advisory board or committee acknowledges the essential role museums play in building community and views the production of the relationships built by the exhibition process equally as valuable to the final physical product of the exhibition (Kinsley 2016, 485).

Underrepresented communities, like the LGBTQ+ community, are not homogenous (Crooke 2006). Though community advisory boards are advantageous for any exhibition that focuses on the history of a traditionally underrepresented community, they can be particularly crucial for uncovering the nuances of LGBTQ+ identities and

their various intersections when working on displaying LGBTQ+ history. Additionally, the use of a community advisory board can aid in museums understanding whether or not the “community they are engaging with is representative, whether the community leaders are accepted by the members, and how the balance of authority between the community and museum expert is best struck,” (Crooke 2006, 184). As was demonstrated in the challenges present during the collection process, History Colorado struggled to reach diverse intersections of the LGBTQ+ community. This challenge ultimately persisted throughout the entire exhibition process. Early investment in a community advisory board could have remedied a lack of diversity in the collections process, which could have led to a more intersectional, community-driven exhibition process. Specific to *Rainbows & Revolutions* Dawn DiPrince discussed the challenges of representing such a diverse community and how a community advisory board can assist in increasing the inclusion of diverse perspectives:

This is such a hard exhibit, because it’s like, it’s almost an anthology, we’re trying to really be a mile wide and an inch deep. But the LGBT community isn’t a monolith. Like, it’s super diverse, within the community, so it becomes even hard to do a mile wide and an inch deep, when there’s just so many perspectives and, and ways of seeing this history and being this history... I just think anytime we’re doing community-based exhibit development, it [a community advisory board] is a good idea. (Dawn DiPrince, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

History Colorado has successfully utilized community advisory boards with various of their exhibitions. One pertinent example is the *El Movimiento* exhibition that details the Chicano Movement of the 1960s in Colorado. For this exhibition, which opened in 2015, and now remains a staple within the museum's permanent gallery spaces, History Colorado put together a diverse community advisory board of those who identify as Chicano and many who were present during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Additionally, History Colorado assembled an additional community advisory board to reinterpret the installation when the exhibit traveled to other History Colorado sites, including the El Pueblo History Museum. Dawn DiPrince detailed the benefits of this community engagement and how it led to success for *El Movimiento* during our interview:

We met once a week for six months and not everybody showed up every time, but it was like a very active process. And, I mean, you know, especially when you're working with histories that aren't documented in this traditional way, it mostly lives in the community. We were just, I mean, we were able to get things that we just wouldn't have ever found any other way. I also think there's something, you know, you can do a lot of one-on-one stuff, but I always find it's like this magical thing that happens when you pull a group together. They help each other remember things. And you can get deeper into the story. (Dawn DiPrince, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

Despite the clear benefits of incorporating a community advisory board, *Rainbows & Revolutions* was not allowed the chance to experience those benefits, but not without a lack of trying and concern from those working closely on the exhibit. In the curator's own words:

I actually had one [a community advisory board] for the exhibit way back in 2015. And so I was planning on having one for this one also, which is why I tried to get all this planning started over a year ago... Because when you do an exhibit especially an exhibit like this that is, so community based, you do need an advisory board. Past exhibits here that have had them – *El Movimiento* which is an exhibit about the Chicano rights movement, had a very robust advisory board, the Sand Creek exhibit that will be opening in November, their advisory board obviously, is tribal members. Couldn't do that without them. Both of those exhibits, there's no way they could have happened without the advisory boards. And people again did not see this exhibit the same way... but I had a lot of people on standby. I had my packet ready to go ... When you have an advisory board you meet with them, and you start discussing the exhibit and what they think should be in it. And, you know, you go back and forth about 'Well, if that can't be in it, what do you think?' And then you get to the point where you start bringing in label copy, and they start going through that. So, they can tell you if it's worded correctly, I mean, all the way up to the end. And since that label copy wasn't being written until about, I think the first draft Julie did in February, there was no

way to do one of these advisory boards for this exhibit. And I think that did hurt it. I am often curious what that advisory board would have looked like... [the] LGBTQ+ [community] is pretty segregated, that it would be interesting to see how that would have worked, because now that the exhibits open... some people thought, 'Oh, we should have talked about this more', or 'We need to talk about this person more or this institution'. And so it would have been interesting in the advisory board... Because everybody thinks their story is important, and I do not say it's not, it's just, [we] would need three times the [exhibit] space. (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

The lack of a community advisory board does not mean there was a complete nonexistence of community involvement present in *Rainbows & Revolutions*. On the contrary, three other staff members noted how community collaboration was more prevalent earlier on during the process. Still, as the time constraints of the exhibition production started settling in, that community aspect was lost.

I would say that, before we started planning the exhibit, we were incredibly in touch with the community. We were talking to them all the time, we're making sure we were getting this right, talking day in and day out. And then... it atrophied. It really deteriorated. And it was really hard to maintain that same level. (Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)



There's been a lot of community collecting and stuff, but still wasn't like, it wasn't – I wouldn't say it [*Rainbows & Revolutions*] was co-authored by a community. (Dawn DiPrince, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

Being in direct contact with people who represent as many of the facets of the LGBTQ+ community that we could work with, was really important to me. And also being really transparent in our conversations about like what the exhibit could and could not accomplish. You know, we, in the label text specifically called out that the exhibit does not represent BIPOC queer communities as much as we would have liked it to. And that, I think, was a result of not being able to move at the speed of trust. We had to make decisions about the exhibit, and it had to open, and we worked with, particularly the founders of Black Pride, Colorado, but we didn't have enough time to fully build those relationships and trust in a way that, you know, represented fully, that story. And I think this is hard in any exhibit, anything with a timeline that can't be flexible in terms of like moving with the communities that you're working with. (Julie Peterson, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

Though having some level of community engagement in this process was more effective than having no community voice, the lack of an advisory board for this specific exhibition likely caused the lack of intersectionality that is echoed throughout the collections, exhibit development, and reception of the exhibit. Additionally, one potential

issue in exhibits focused on traditionally underrepresented communities is the burden and pressure placed on the curator or staff who are from those communities to effectively be the voice of their respective communities (Vanegas 2003). This pressure, to represent and speak for the entire diverse LGBTQ+ community of Colorado was felt by Aaron Marcus and the LGBTQ+ team members as highlighted by the follow quote, “It was just kind of me and my team doing the best we could, which I feel we did a really good job – Given little support” (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022). This pressure potentially could have been alleviated by the presence of a community advisory board.

*Case Study of Object 2021.77.1 - Roger Beltrami's AIDS Shadow Box*

A major challenge in every exhibit development process is selecting objects and deciding on an overarching narrative and intended or imagined audience for the final display product. Deciding on the intended audience for an exhibition heavily influences the stories and narratives that will be displayed and how they will be displayed to that audience. During the exhibit planning process for *Rainbows & Revolutions*, while there was initial agreement that the exhibition would attempt to cater to both those who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community and those who do not, there was one specific moment of conflict that arose surrounding the inclusion of an object that was deemed to be inappropriate for display in *Rainbows & Revolutions*. In this section, I will discuss the object of focus, providing background to its significance while highlighting arguments on both sides for its inclusion versus exclusion. Finally, I will explain why it was left out of the exhibit and how various staff members felt regarding that decision.

During the collection process in 2021, curator Aaron Marcus was contacted by an individual, Wayne Lee, regarding items he wanted to donate to the collection. Wayne Lee was the partner of the recognized Denver artist and LGBTQ+ activist Roger Beltrami, who passed away in February of 2004 due to AIDS related illness (“Skeletons Protesting the Indifference of the Reagan Administration to Gay Men with AIDS, Artwork, Beltrami (Unknown Date)” n.d.). Beltrami was one of the founding members of ACT UP Colorado, an organization that raised awareness for HIV and AIDS during a time when the government refused to acknowledge the ongoing epidemic. Additionally, Beltrami was a well-known and respected artist in the Denver arts community, his work was shown at various galleries around the city. Wayne Lee donated a large array of items from Beltrami’s time with ACT UP as well as items from his artistic career, in which he constructed AIDS and activist related artworks. One of the items that Wayne Lee donated to History Colorado was a smaller piece of artwork consisting of a shadow box (see Figure 6.4). According to the History Colorado online collections page:

The art piece is a shadow box protest scene original work of art created by Roger Beltrami. Presented as social commentary on the federal government’s silence and inaction to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The frame depicts a brick wall while the interior of the box has skeletons representing those who have died of AIDS holding signs with ACT UP slogans, “ACTION = LIFE” and “SILENCE = DEATH”, as well as an image of former President Ronald Regan and one sign, says, “Fuck you, Ronald Regan.” Attached to the floor of the piece appears to be at least two skeletons missing as their “feet” are attached to the floor. The interior walls of the shadow box are deep red and textured to look like blood (“Skeletons Protesting the Indifference of the Reagan Administration to Gay Men with AIDS, Artwork, Beltrami (Unknown Date)” n.d.)



Figure 6.4: Object 2021.77.1, Skeletons Protesting the Indifference of the Reagan Administration to Gay Men with AIDS, Artwork, Beltrami (unknown date). Photo taken from History Colorado Online Collections Database.

Due to the uniqueness of the piece, the significance of it and its artist's history, and the vital commentary it offers on how gay men in Colorado experienced the lack of government support during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, upon its acquisition into History Colorado's collection, Aaron Marcus immediately knew he wanted to display this work in the LGBTQ+ history exhibit (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022). This sentiment of the importance of the object and its inclusion within the exhibit was shared by multiple exhibit team members, including the exhibit developer assigned to the project Julie Peterson. Furthermore, as exhibit planning commenced and layouts and designs were being rendered, these plans initially included the object. It was not until the exhibit team had already decided to include the object that they were met with

hesitancies from the executive staff level at History Colorado. As explained by the executive staff, the supposed hesitancy around the inclusion of the object did not relate to the difficult history the object portrayed or even the subject matter of the HIV/AIDS epidemic but rather was concentrated on displaying a curse word within the exhibit. Jason Hanson explained this hesitancy during our interview through the following quote:

It was an artifact that Aaron and Julie really wanted to use to speak to the AIDS crisis and the strong feelings that it evoked among the LGBTQ community. Rightfully so understandably so. But it had some profanity in it. And while we are not up opposed to profanity as a sort of blanket statement – It’s an authentic expression for a lot of people. In this particular case, using the F word, I know from many previous experiences is a really – it’s a flashpoint for a lot of visitors. And when I think about this through the lens of effective communication of this history for a general audience, that is exactly the sort of thing that will overwhelm the rest of the good work, it will become the talking point in any media stories about it, it will become the subject of complaints from visitors. And in my opinion, in this case, it’s something we try to avoid. But if there were a really, really compelling reason we needed to use it. You know, if, for instance, a President had said it, and it was a really important sort of, quote, to understanding how they felt about immigration, then it might be a different story. But in this case, I felt like there were adequate objects to convey the essence of the story, which was about the depth of feeling and pain that the LGBTQ community had as

organized around the AIDS crisis. And I just felt like we really needed to go with a different artifact. (Jason Hanson, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022)

In the face of this initial pushback, the exhibit team felt extremely passionate about advocating for the inclusion of this object despite its use of profanity to emphasize its message. Furthermore, based on conversations had with executive staff, the exhibit team was under the impression that if they could make a compelling argument and successfully contextualize the use of the curse word, the object would be able to be included in the final exhibit. Curator Aaron Marcus explained his efforts to include the object and how he was still met with decisive opposition despite these efforts and ultimately told no.

I was told no; I could not put that in there because that one little sign had the F word in it. Again, this is a little sign, don't even know it might be smaller than a half an inch wide. That is one thing Julie and I, we were both insistent should be in the exhibit period...I wanted this piece in there, but we were told no. So Julie and I did a lot of research, contacted a lot of people outside of History Colorado in the museum field, professors, to ask their opinion on it. And everybody said to have a local piece of art like this - that is unheard of, because something like that would have ended up at a larger institution now like the GLBT Museum in San Francisco or ONE archives or New York or the Smithsonian even. But to have it here, telling this history, everyone was like 'you can't not have that in there.'

Well, we wrote the most amazing label for it, to put it in context. I contacted state officials here to see if there'd be any problem. And ultimately, it was not put in, I was not allowed to put it in the exhibit. (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

Exhibit Developer Julie Peterson also explained how in conducting research surrounding the inclusion of the object and working on writing an appropriate label to put the piece in context, the exhibit team initially had a meeting planned with the executive staff, specifically with the Executive Director, Dawn DiPrince, in which they hoped to argue their case. Ultimately, this meeting was canceled without any given reason, and the exhibition team could not share their work surrounding the object or sufficiently fight for its inclusion.

The biggest challenge and kind of disappointment was that we were not allowed to use a piece of art by Roger Beltrami, because it had the F word written on it. And we, both Aaron and I, really wanted to use that piece, because it had a ton of emotional resonance. But we were told by Jason, that our Executive Director, Dawn, did not – that it's sort of a rule moving forward, that we can't use profanity, specifically the F word. We didn't really get clarity on... what specific curse words are not okay. But the F word is definitely not one of them. So that was really challenging, because we didn't get to have a conversation with Dawn

about it, you know, face to face. So, it was just frustrating. (Julie Peterson, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

This scenario in which Roger Beltrami's shadow box was excluded from the exhibit, supposedly because of the use of profanity, which it appears became a new standard that was set in place during this exhibit process, is indicative of a more significant issue surrounding the narrative of the exhibit, the intended audience, censorship in museums, and the act of making history more palatable for an exhibit's perceived audience. Throughout discussing this scenario with Aaron Marcus during his interview, it became evident that the inclusion of this object was vital not only due to the significant history it holds while illustrating collective feelings of the LGBTQ+ community during a time when they were facing extreme neglect by the US government, but additionally Aaron Marcus felt a clear obligation to the donor and original artist of the object. Despite the intended audience being both those inside and outside of the LGBTQ+ community, the exhibit team strongly felt that it was integral to accurately represent the objects and stories of the donors that had contributed to the collection and that there was a way to do so without alienating those outside of the community.

In contrast, the executive level made clear in their interviews that they do not feel the museum's exhibition obligation is to its object donors but rather should be geared towards its audiences. Jason Hanson noted explicitly, "the curator feels an obligation to the people they have collected from, which is fine and admirable. But the obligation of an exhibit is to its audience, not to the collectors" (Jason Hanson, Unpublished Interview



Transcript, August 2022). It is fundamental to note that this idea that museum exhibits should prioritize the needs and perspectives of their audiences rather than those of object donors or the subjects of the exhibit was a critical factor in the closure of History Colorado's controversial Sand Creek Massacre exhibit in 2012 (Hoadley 2020).

Due to the differing opinions of the exhibit team and the executive level, as previously mentioned, the object was ultimately absent from the final exhibition. The absence of Roger Beltrami's artwork was met with significantly differing feelings toward the final product of the exhibition. Members of the exhibit team explained their sentiments that the exhibit was not as strong due to this exclusion. One team member felt as passionate as to say that History Colorado was actively making history comfortable for its visitors. On the other end of the spectrum, Jason Hanson felt that the exhibition was more robust for the exclusion, arguing that the absence resulted in the exhibition being suitable for all ages. Jason Hanson's continuing support of the object's exclusion illustrates the common phenomenon that Janet Marstine discusses in her 2020 book *Curating Under Pressure*, where museum leaders typically resort to excluding or censoring information and narratives to avoid perceived potential controversy (Marstine 2020). Furthermore, the Executive Director, Dawn DiPrince neglected to mention anything regarding the artwork or this instance of disagreement and challenge throughout her interview.

Though the default amongst many museum institutions and their leadership is one of risk aversion they often attempt to justify by highlighting the potential loss of income, reduction in attendance, unwanted media attention, and threats to their institutional

reputation, it is often the case that the inclusion of these “controversial” narratives and objects can lead to greater engagement and promote critical examination amongst museum visitors (Marstine 2020). For example, at institutions such as the Denver Art Museum, located just across the street from the History Colorado Center, art pieces and exhibitions that some could deem controversial are frequently displayed and well-received by museum visitors. One example is the inclusion of works by Cree artist Kent Monkman in the newly renovated Indigenous Arts of North America gallery. Monkman is well known for his both provocative and politically charged artworks that work to dismantle dominant colonial narratives (Cvetkovic 2020). Similar to the artwork by Roger Beltrami, Kent Monkman’s works on display at the Denver Art Museum are explicitly queer and political, but rather than censoring or choosing not to display these works due to perceived possible controversies, the Denver Art Museum recognizes the significance Monkman’s art holds in representing previously silenced narratives and in result they proudly contextualize and display Kent Monkman’s works.

Because Roger Beltrami’s AIDS shadow box was ultimately eliminated from the exhibition by museum leadership, we will unfortunately never have a clear understanding of if its inclusion would have resulted in criticism from visitors and the media alike or if it’s reception would have been positive. However, this scenario makes clear that despite much progress History Colorado has made concerning understanding its commitment to the communities it works to represent, there exists a disconnect between levels of employees regarding what this commitment entails and includes.

## 6.4 The Donor Experience and Reception

In addition to understanding how staff perceived the collections and exhibit development process, I thought it was integral to specifically understand the experience of individuals in the LGBTQ+ community that donated objects to either the collection or the exhibit. In this section I will begin by sharing two examples of the donor experience as related to History Colorado's exhibit. After I highlight each donor's experience, I will end by summarizing both donors' reception to final exhibit.

### *Donor #1 – Linda Fowler*

Linda Fowler (she/her) is a cis-gender lesbian who was active in organizing for the lesbian and feminist communities during the 1970s in Denver, Colorado. Linda Fowler was a central staff member of the Denver-based feminist newspaper *Big Mama Rag* which ran from 1972 to 1984. Additionally, Fowler remained active within the community, advocating for legal protections for LGBTQ+ individuals alongside the Colorado Legal Initiatives Project (CLIP) which was founded in the 1990s and opposed Colorado's Amendment 2 that disallowed all legislative, executive, or judicial action to protect LGBTQ+ individuals. Amendment 2 notoriously earned Colorado the nickname "The Hate State" in the 1990s.

During my interview with Linda Fowler I was interested in understanding her access and exposure to LGBTQ+ history growing up and what she believes about the importance of documenting, preserving, and displaying LGBTQ+ history today. Fowler explained to me that growing up, she had "zero" exposure to LGBTQ+ history. She noted that there was a "complete absence of any sort of presence [of LGBTQ+ history] ...even

in a negative aspect...we were not present,” (Linda Fowler, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022). Furthermore, Linda Fowler explained the significance of projects like History Colorado’s through the following quote:

History is identity. Without history, you don’t have an identity. And I think you don’t really have an existence without a history. There’s a lot of examples that can be drawn with that, in the larger society, not just in the lesbian and gay society. And look, for example, the overall history of women, which has been slighted in all written history, and documented history is now becoming much more so... We have been seeking our own history and identity as women, in order to know what our possibilities in life are...Without some sort of history people don’t know who they are. That’s been absolutely the case with gays and lesbians. We don’t know who we are, unless we know who other people like us are, and who we’ve been. So we don’t, we don’t exist...History is what gives you an existence. That’s the importance of doing this. It can’t be overstated. (Linda Fowler, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022)

In this quote Linda Fowler demonstrates the importance of the recognition and display of LGBTQ+ within cultural institutions. Moreover, Fowler noted that the presence of this collection and exhibit at a state institution is an “affirmation on a very public level and on a state sanction level... and affirmation coming from that realm is a major support and significance,” (Linda Fowler, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022).

After discussing the absence and importance of the presence of LGBTQ+ history, I was interested in understanding what the donation process was like for Linda Fowler as someone who's history has been undervalued for so long. Fowler donated a wide variety of objects and documents to History Colorado's collection including almost every single issue of *Big Mama Rag*, multiple photo albums including images of the 1975 World Conference on Women in Mexico, documents regarding Amendment 2, and minutes from meetings during her time on the Lesbian and Gay Advisory Committee established by Denver's former Mayor Wellington Webb. I began by asking Fowler to explain how it felt when History Colorado first reached out to her about this collecting and exhibit. She explained:

I wasn't hesitant about it at all. I was appreciative, quite appreciative. For me personally one of the things that I had been thinking about for several years was 'What am I going to do with this material?' And I actually had been looking around for a place, to get it to an archive, where it could be utilized and stored and made accessible to people who would perhaps want to use it in future...So I was excited about that. (Linda Fowler, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022)

After History Colorado reached out to Fowler, she sent the majority of her materials to the museum initiating the formal object donation process. Despite initial

overall excitement about the project, the donor explained varying feelings regarding the formal process:

It was positive, and there were parts of it that were frustrating, it went both directions. I think my initial contact there was with you [Madeline Ohaus] if I'm not mistaken. And that part went quite well... And that was very good, right from the get-go working with you then I made contact with Aaron. And that initial contact was good but, there were a lot of stops and starts and trying to get this done. So I found, I found the pace of getting it done to be frustrating. That may have been partly because of COVID, which is certainly a possibility. Also because of limitations on how many staff might have been available to help with this work. I don't know exactly how much funding was available, for example, to hire staff and to get this kind of thing done. As you know, this kind of work takes time and time takes people and that takes money. This can't all be done with volunteers.... There's there is no question about that. But the overall process was both rewarding and frustrating. (Linda Fowler, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022)

In this excerpt it become evident that the perceived lack of time and internal institutional support as highlighted by staff during their interviewees, was mirrored in and directly influenced the donor experience. Overall, Linda Fowler's experience demonstrates the excitement and pride that can surround being acknowledged by public institutions and

being asked to cornubite your story to state collections. However, it also highlights how if these processes are lacking in time, staffing, and resources, this process and the donor-museum relationship can be damaged and lead to hesitations on the end of the donor.

*Donor #2 – Lee Robinson*

My second donor interviewee was Lee Robinson (they/them). Lee Robinson identifies as a non-binary dyke and also uses the terms lesbian and queer as identifiers. Though Robinson did not grow up in Colorado, they are a prominent member of Denver’s LGBTQ+ community and one of the founders and co-hosts of *Dyketopia*, the incredibly popular monthly “delightfully unhinged queer comedy variety show,” which started in 2021 (“Dyketopia” n.d.). In interviewing Robinson, I was interested in the perspective of a younger LGBTQ+ donor and if generational differences resulted in varying experiences and perspectives on LGBTQ+ history.

Despite a multiple decade age gap between Linda Fowler and Lee Robinson, they also noted that their exposure to LGBTQ+ history growing up in Missouri was “None, literally none,” (Lee Robinson, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022). Additionally, Robinson shared similar views on the importance of the collection, preservation, and display of LGBTQ+ history, specifically by a state agency noting:

It’s super huge. I mean, it’s like things that are not funded are not considered important in the eyes of the state, or the government. I think it’s hugely important. I think we need more representation in all aspects of queer history. I think all I knew about queer people [growing up] was the AIDS crisis... I think it’s needed.

I think it's shocking that this is one of the first state history museums to have anything related to queer people, you know, when you step back and think about that - that's sad. That's really sad. But I think it's important because it helps people know that we do exist and that we're f\*\*\*ing awesome (Lee Robinson, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022)

Furthermore, they expanded on the necessity and obligation of the state to collect, preserve, and display LGBTQ+ history noting that, "state funds should be used to document queer history, because it's also been the state's problem f\*\*\*ing us over, over time. This is, I think one small way of showing that we matter and that we are important" (Lee Robinson, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022). Additionally, Robinson expanded on how the representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in a museum setting is impactful not only for the LGBTQ+ community but can be beneficial to those outside of the community:

Obviously, it's it holds huge importance to our community. But then also, I think it helps straight people humanize us too...I do think there's something about the kind of serious codified nature of a museum saying, 'Look at this history, look how beautiful it is, look how storied it is' that I think can put pause on straight people who might not have a gay friend, who might not know anyone [in the LGBTQ+ community], and bring them a little bit more empathy. So yeah - I think it's super important for everybody. (Lee Robinson, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022)



Overall, Robinson described an overtly positive experience in donating their objects to History Colorado noting how incredible it felt to be included amongst decades of LGBTQ+ activists and community members throughout Colorado's history. In contrast to Linda Fowler, Lee Robinson did not experience as many frustrations or delays in their donation process. This may be the result of Robinson currently living in Denver, while Fowler currently resides out of state or perhaps it was due to the fact that Lee Robinson had a smaller quantity of objects to donate to the collection.

#### *Donor Reception of the Exhibit*

Alongside the donors' experiences surrounding donating to the collection, I was interested in understanding how donors felt regarding seeing their objects within the exhibit and the exhibit itself. Overall both donors had positive reactions to the exhibit. Lee Robinson noted that seeing their objects on display for the public felt like "a huge honor to be included, to feel included in that way...it was just really special like something [they] never would have imagined" (Lee Robinson, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022).

Linda Fowler, while she noted that she felt enthusiastic about several aspects of the exhibition and highlighted the overall importance of the exhibition, she also brought various valuable critiques to the table during her interview. Most notably, Linda felt that the exhibition lacked adequate representation of women, specifically women of color, and also discussed that she felt the exhibition space was too small. Linda Fowler noted this lack of representation and minimal allotment of space might be linked to the need for a larger budget for the project that would have allowed staff to tell the whole story of

LGBTQ+ Coloradoans more accurately. Despite the small space provided, Fowler emphasized that she felt Aaron Marcus and his team did the best they could with the small space, noting that “rather than [artifacts] just being around the walls, there was a lot of internal objects as well,” (Linda Fowler, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022). Overall, Linda Fowler accentuated that *Rainbows & Revolutions* should be viewed as a starting point for the representation of LGBTQ+ history at the state history museum rather than as a final product.

### **6.5. Internal and Visitor Reception of the Exhibit**

In this final section of my analysis, findings, and results, I seek to understand and highlight the general reception of the exhibit. While I briefly discussed perceptions of the final exhibit regarding object donors above, this section focuses on both exhibit reception internally from the perspective of staff who worked on the exhibition and the public’s overall response and reactions to the exhibition. I will begin by highlighting how staff felt about the final exhibition utilizing data from my semi-structured interviews. Next, I will discuss overall attendance numbers, compare them to other previous exhibitions in the Ballantine Gallery, and discuss what this might tell us about the overall popularity of the exhibit. Finally, I turn to my survey data to understand a broader picture of the public’s reaction to the exhibit.

Even considering the variety of challenges that History Colorado staff faced during the collection and exhibition planning process of *Rainbows & Revolutions*, generally, the staff was increasingly proud of how the final exhibition came to fruition.

The following excerpts from my semi-structured interviews illustrate the sense of pride and accomplishment that staff involved in the exhibit felt after opening day:

SHL: I can't help but feel incredibly, incredibly proud of the night it opened... I felt like we had really completed something big, something that felt incredibly personal, important, and really, really hopeful to me. And it was wonderful to see my community around me celebrate it... I'm proud of this – the fact that it's there, the fact that I can see this, I can see my history, I can see my friends' history, and that I can see this vibrant space full of vibrant, vibrant lives. (Soleil Hanberry-Lizzi, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

JP: I love it. I actually was really excited. I was in a meeting with some folks from History Nebraska about something else and they, at the end, were like 'Oh, my gosh... the latest exhibit *Rainbows & Revolutions* looks so cool. Whoever decided to use all that colorful Plexiglas – great decision, it looks awesome.' So it was just cool to see like – they haven't even seen the actual exhibit. And it already feels like it's having an impact in the world. (Julie Peterson, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

AM: It's amazing, it looks amazing. The opening night everybody was very positive about it. And since it's opened, I've heard from a lot of people, be it donor, strangers – about how great it is. So that makes me happy. A lot of

younger kids are coming in to see it and their parents or, you know, their guardians, I should say, because I don't know who these people are to them. But I see a lot of kids going into the exhibit, which makes me happier than anything... if kids want to come in and see it, that's all I need. Because then they know they aren't alone. There is a community out there that, you know, it's scary when you're a young kid, and you feel "different" from other people. And people just don't understand what that's like, you know, because you don't know if you tell somebody, your parents might seem cool. But maybe you tell them that you identify differently than they do, who knows what'll happen. So, it is a scary moment and to see an exhibit like this, I really hoped that they know they're not alone. (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

JH: I think it's fantastic. I am really proud of it...I think this is one of those situations where there was a real hunger for a lot of information not to be consumed, but also just to be represented. And so I'm really proud of how well presented all of the information and artifacts are. I think there's some really significant stories in there that the general public will not have encountered before...It did not seem like it was going to be as urgently relevant as it has become. And so I think that's all the more reason that I'm really proud of it...I'm proud that here in Colorado, we did do this exhibit, and people have received it really, really well. And I think we can just continue to build on that (Jason Hanson, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022)

DD: I think the exhibit is fantastic. The opening night was just so – oh, I don't know, it's hard to even articulate how very special it was, just to see really how meaningful it was to everybody who was there (Dawn DiPrince Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022)

The above excerpts highlight the sense of pride that opening day and revealing the exhibit to the public instilled in staff members at History Colorado and the overwhelming sense of importance and urgency staff feels in conducting work like *Rainbows & Revolutions*.

While staff did, in fact, feel prideful and enthusiastic about what they had accomplished, there remained a prevailing sense that the whole story was not being told within this exhibit and that the content was deficient in various ways. Staff discussed throughout our interviews that they not only felt the exhibit lacked adequate representation of the BIPOC LGBTQ+ community in Colorado but also that they received feedback shortly after the opening regarding questions of the exhibit's size, permanence, the inclusion of more stories, and intersectionally throughout the exhibit.

#### *Attendance Numbers*

In addition to my interviews, participant observation, and surveys, I also utilized daily attendance numbers to the Ballantine Gallery recorded by History Colorado's guest services staff. As I explained in the methods chapter, one of the essential tasks of the guest services team is recording attendance to each exhibit daily. The guest services team

uses people counters that use motion detection at each exhibit entrance to track how many people enter the space daily. Because the motion sensors cannot distinguish whether someone is entering or exiting the exhibit space, History Colorado uses a formula to adjust the number to a more accurate estimate. Additionally, they account for staff walkthroughs in their count. To account for these issues, the formula calculates the final count, divides the total number displayed on the reader by 2, and then reduces it by 10%. These numbers provide a somewhat objective metric of exhibit attendance and popularity; however, the accuracy of these counts can be impacted by external variables like missing data, museum closures, or variable museum hours due to events. Furthermore, the numbers I present may be moderately skewed by fluctuations in COVID-19 and people's comfort level in public settings like museums. However, the numbers I am comparing all fall after the introduction of the COVID-19 vaccine to the boarder public.

History Colorado provided me access to all the numbers for the Ballantine Gallery across multiple exhibits. In the first 3 months of *Rainbows & Revolutions*, June 4, 2022 – September 4, 2022, the calculated attendance totaled 11,921 visitors to the exhibition. I compared these numbers to two previous exhibits in the Ballantine Gallery. The first was *Aprons Chronicles*, which was on display from January 23, 2021 – May 31, 2021 (4 months), and the second was *The Power of Horses* which ran from November 20, 2021, to May 8, 2022 (5.5 months). During the entirety of *Apron Chronicles*, approximately 5,104 visitors attended the exhibition. During the entirety of *The Power of Horses*, over the span of 5.5 months, the exhibit attendance totaled approximately 9,213 visitors. These

numbers are illustrative of the overwhelming popularity of *Rainbows & Revolutions*. Comparing just the first 3 months of *Rainbows & Revolutions* to the full 4 months of *Aprons Chronicles*, attendance was 133% higher for *Rainbows & Revolutions*. Additionally, when comparing the first 3 months of *Rainbows & Revolutions* to the full 5.5 months of *The Power of Horses*, attendance to *Rainbows & Revolutions* was 29% higher.

#### *Post-Exhibit Survey*

One of the main goals of this thesis was to further understand how the public perceives the integration and presence of LGBTQ+ histories on display at their state history museum. To gain these insights, in this section I will present and offer interpretations of the quantitative and qualitative data derived from my post-exhibit visitor survey. After cleaning the initial data there were 98 usable post-exhibit surveys.

Before I begin discussing the overall findings of the survey, its important I introduce the demographics of my survey participants. During the survey, participants were given a range of LGBTQ+ (and non-LGBTQ+) identities, gender identities, ethnicities, and age groups to choose from and the demographic questions allowed participants to check all identities that applied. However, here, I present the demographic data in aggregate form to minimize the chances of sharing any potentially identifiable information. According to the demographic questions, 71 participants identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, while 23 participants did not, and 4 elected not to respond to this question. Therefore, LGBTQ+ identified people made up approximately 75% of this sample. Forty-four participants identified as men, 38 participants identified as

women, and 15 participants identified as nonbinary, genderqueer, or another gender identity. Regarding ethnicities, 67 identified as white, 11 identified as multi-racial or as having more than one ethnicity, 1 individual identified as Middle Eastern/Arab/Arab-American, 8 people identified as Latino/Latinx/Hispanic/Chicano/Latin American, 6 people identified as Asian/Asian-American/Filipino, 1 individual as American Indian/Native American/Alaskan Native, 3 people identified as African/African-American/Black, and 1 survey participant opted not to answer. Finally, 12 participants were between 18-24, 42 between 25-34, 11 between 35-44, 14 between 45-54, 14 between 55-64, and 5 participants were over the age of 65.

While this sample is somewhat diverse, I acknowledge that majority of my survey participants were white and cis-gender. This overrepresentation of white visitors is consistent with contemporary research that demonstrates that museum visitors are less diverse than the American public (Farrell and Medvedeva 2010). Additionally, this sample is overrepresented by LGBTQ+ identified respondents, which may reflect that people belonging to the LGBTQ+ community were highly engaged and more likely to want to share their feedback on the exhibit.

I began by examining the ratings-based multiple-choice and free response questions. Figures 6.5-6.11 include plots displaying the participants' responses to the ratings-based questions. Many post-exhibit survey participants came to the History Colorado Center exclusively to see *Rainbows and Revolutions*. Roughly 57% of participants indicated that they came to the museum to see the LGBTQ+ exhibit specifically, 26% indicated that they knew about the LGBTQ+ exhibit, but it was just one



part of their museum visit, and 17% indicated that they didn't know about the LGBTQ+ exhibit but decided to visit while they were visiting History Colorado (see Figure 6.5).

When asked to describe what drew them to the LGBTQ+ history exhibit survey respondents indicated the importance of representation, inclusivity, and learning about the LGBTQ+ community represented by quotes like:

“Lack of LGBTQ voices/stories in my kids’ classrooms.”

“My son recently identified as part of the LGBTQ community.”

“I am queer and crave seeing my history.”

“Representation of my [the LGBTQ+] community in a museum is rare and special.”

The survey also gauged participants’ general level of interest in the exhibit’s content. Most participants indicated that before they visited the exhibit, they were somewhat interested or very interested in learning about LGBTQ+ history in Colorado. Only 2% indicated that they were not at all interested, while 37% indicated that they were somewhat interested, and 61% indicated that they were very interested (see Figure 6.6).

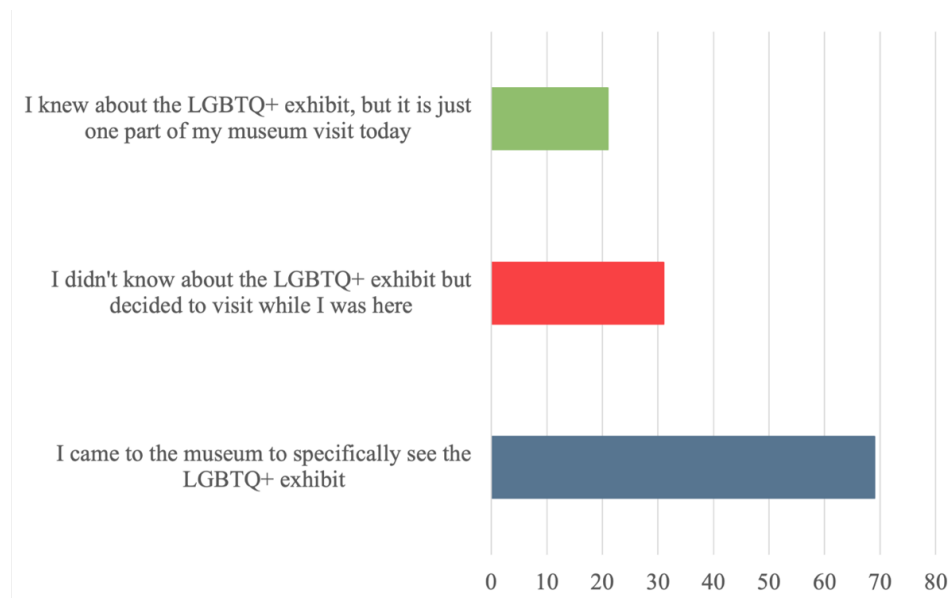


Figure 6.5: Counts of responses to the post exhibit survey question: “Please tells us which option most closely fits your reason for visiting the History Colorado Center today.”

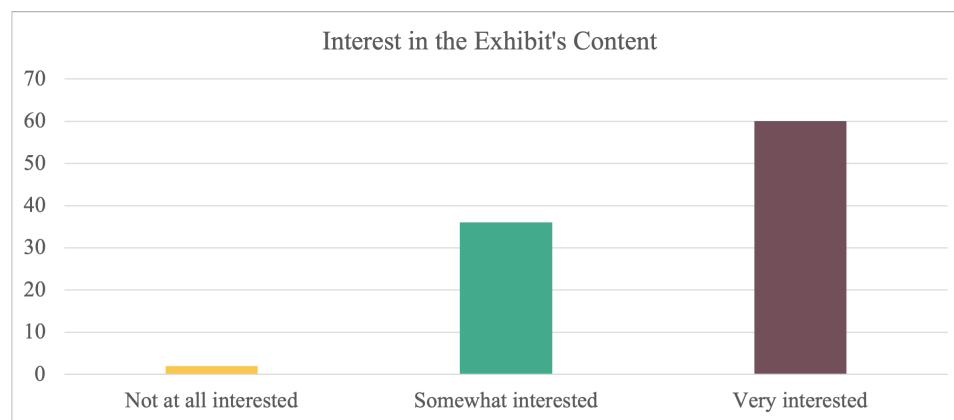


Figure 6.6: Total counts (N = 98) of responses to the post exhibit survey question: “Before you visited the exhibit, how would you describe your general level of interest in learning about LGBTQ+ history in Colorado?” Some survey participants responded to all but the demographic items, so they are represented here in the overall counts, but are not included in the breakdowns related to LGBTQ+ identities in later figures.

These numbers, along with the overall exhibit attendance numbers as discussed above, indicate that the *Rainbows & Revolutions* exhibition specifically drew visitors to

the History Colorado Center. Therefore, this exhibition was undoubtedly popular among people from diverse backgrounds, including those belonging to the LGBTQ+ community and those who do not. This data speaks to the overall excitement around seeing and learning LGBTQ+ history at one’s state history museum. In fact, over 85% percent of survey participants were not History Colorado members suggesting that the *Rainbows & Revolutions* exhibit likely attracted guests to the state history museum that normally do not typically visit History Colorado and likely might not have otherwise.

Overall, the response to the exhibit was largely positive, with most participants highly rating their overall experience of *Rainbows and Revolutions*. In total, only 2% of respondents indicated that their experience was poor or fair. 14% rated the exhibit “good,” 40% rated the exhibit “excellent,” and 44% rated the exhibit “outstanding.”



Figure 6.7: Total counts (N =98) of responses to the post exhibit survey question: “Please rate your Overall Experience with the LGBTQ+ History exhibit.”

The survey free-response questions attempted to gain more insight into participants’ interest and experience ratings. Participants were asked to elaborate on their ratings, describe if the exhibit met their expectations, and what they would like to see

more or less of. Four major themes emerged from the free response answers focused on visitor experience. Respondents discussed: 1) that they wished the exhibit was larger, 2) that they wished the exhibit was permanent, 3) that they wished the exhibit was more diverse and intersectional, and 4) that the exhibit could have included more personal narratives. When asked “Please explain what would have made the exhibit “outstanding” for you,” respondents wrote:

“Bigger! Way too small to fit all the history of Queer people - we deserve more space.”

“I would like a permanent version of this exhibit.”

“The exhibit being bigger and incorporating more about queer people of color would have made it outstanding for me.”

“It’s a great exhibit but I was hoping for more personal accounts.”

When asked if the exhibit met their expectations, respondents replied:

“Absolutely it did. I want more of it.”

“I had no expectations as I didn’t know it was here. I was glad that it is front and center and not tucked away in a corner.”

“It could have included more with regard to intersections of race & disability in queer communities.”

“No, the exhibit was much smaller than I thought it would be.”

These quotes emphasize the importance of not only representation, but also intersectionality. Additionally, these responses highlight the importance of dedicating

institutional resources to exhibits about history from traditionally underrepresented and marginalized groups.

I was also interested in if LGBTQ+ identity impacted visitors' experience of *Rainbows and Revolutions*. Therefore, I split the data by LGBTQ+ identified or non-LGBTQ+ identified and examined patterns in responses to the questions on interest in the exhibit's content and experience of the exhibit. Bar graphs displaying the responses to the interest and experience questions split by LGBTQ+ identity are displayed in Figures 6.8 and 6.9.

These bar graphs indicated slightly different response patterns by LGBTQ+ identified individuals, therefore I conducted two independent samples t-tests to assess if there were quantitative differences in these ratings between LGBTQ+ identified respondents and non-LGBTQ+ identified respondents. The interest and experience questions were rated on 1-3 and 1-5 scales, respectively, with 1 representing no interest or a poor experience, and 3 and 5 representing very interested or an outstanding experience. On average, non-LGBTQ+ identified respondents indicated slightly less interest in the exhibit's content ( $M = 2.26, SD = .54$ ) compared to LGBTQ+ identified respondents ( $M = 2.7, SD = .49$ ). The t-test indicated that this difference was significant  $t(92) = -3.68, p < .001$ . In contrast, non-LGBTQ+ identified respondents rated their overall experience of the exhibit higher ( $M = 4.57, SD = .51$ ) compared to LGBTQ+ identified respondents ( $M = 4.14, SD = .83$ ). The t-test also indicated that this difference was significant  $t(92) = 2.30, p = .02$ .

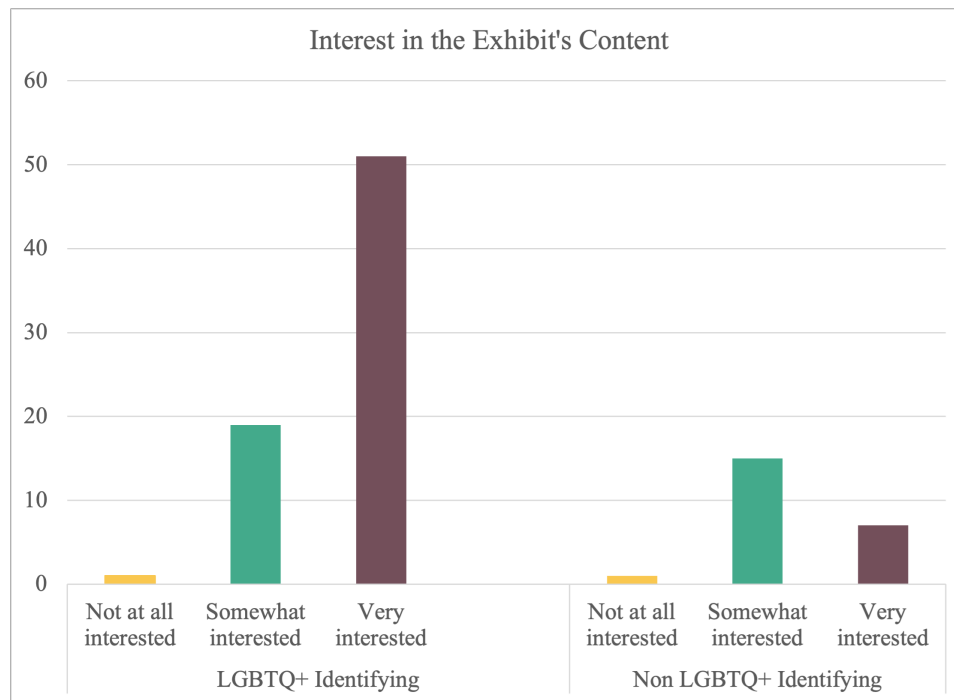


Figure 6.8: Counts of responses to the post exhibit survey question: “Before you visited the exhibit, how would you describe your general level of interest in learning about LGBTQ+ history in Colorado?” split by LGBTQ+ identity. The figures are on different scales, as more LGBTQ+ identified people completed the survey ( $n = 71$ ) than non-LGBTQ+ identified people ( $n = 23$ ).

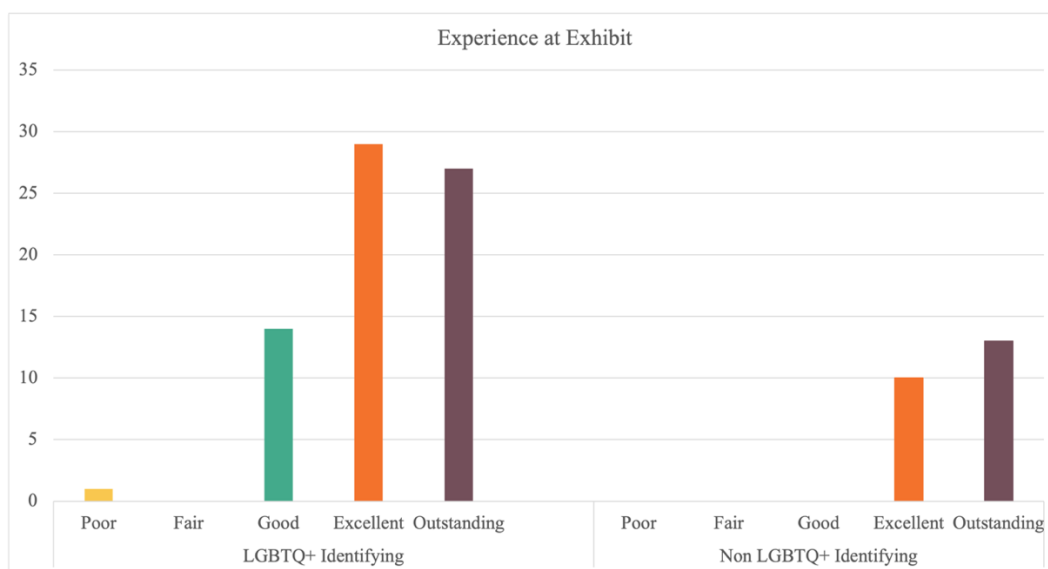


Figure 6.9: Counts of responses to the post exhibit survey question: “Please rate your Overall Experience with the LGBTQ+ History exhibit.” split by LGBTQ+ identity. The figures are on different scales, as more LGBTQ+ identified people completed the survey ( $n = 71$ ) than non-LGBTQ+ identified people ( $n = 23$ ).

These quantitative results should be interpreted with restraint, as this was a convenience sample where participants self-selected into the survey, the LGBTQ+ identified group was larger than the non-LGBTQ+ identified group, and the survey responses were quite skewed with a limited amount of people indicating neutral and negative experiences. However, these results suggest that though LGBTQ+ identified respondents were initially more interested in the content of the exhibit than non-LGBTQ+ identified respondents going into the exhibit, non-LGBTQ+ respondents came away from the exhibit with a slightly more positive experience overall. This phenomenon may reflect LGBTQ+ identified individuals approaching the content in the exhibit with a more critical eye due to the historic lack of inclusion of and often poorly implemented representations of LGBTQ+ histories within history museums (Middleton 2017). Likewise, these numbers may illustrate and further reinforce claims of multiple LGBTQ+

focused museum scholars arguing that representation of marginalized histories in the museum itself is not enough, but that these representations must meet standards of accuracy, inclusivity, intersectionality, and visible investment of the institution (Middleton 2017). Moreover, the overwhelmingly positive ratings of the exhibit by non-LGBTQ+ people and LGBTQ+ people alike, further illustrates that when museums chose to highlight histories and narratives that are often relegated to the category of “niche,” it’s not in fact exclusively those in the community that show up and have positive experiences, like many believe.

Additionally, I wanted to understand how people felt overall about the importance of the inclusion of LGBTQ+ histories at their state history museum. In order to gauge my participants perceived importance, or possible lack thereof, of LGBTQ+ history’s inclusion in the museum I asked to rate their agreement with the following statement, “I believe LGBTQ+ history is important and should be included in museums,” and asked them to elaborate on their answer in a free response question (see Figure 6.10)

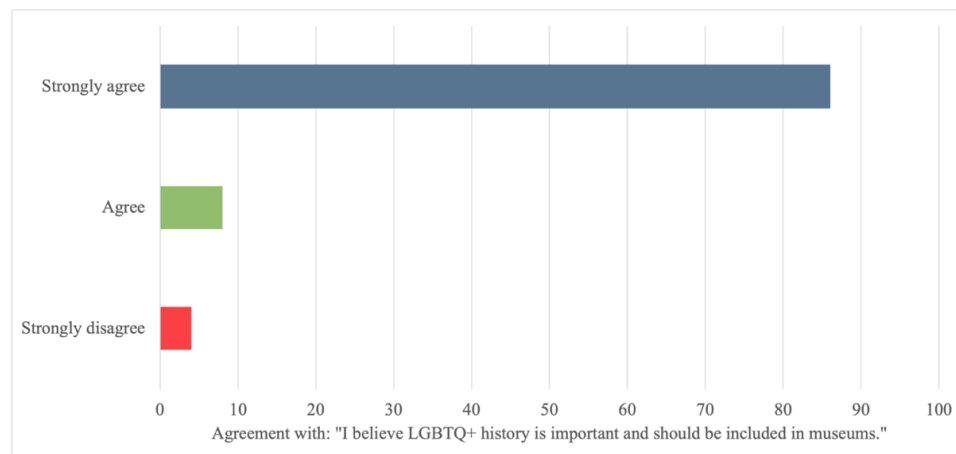


Figure 6.10: Counts of responses to the post exhibit survey question: “Please rate your agreement with the following statement: I believe LGBTQ+ history is important and should be included in museums.”



Participants overwhelmingly indicated that they believed that LGBTQ+ history is important and should be included in history museums with over 85% strongly agreeing with the statement. Only 4 participants selected that they strongly disagree with the statement, however when I examined their free response, these 4 individuals all stated that LGBTQ+ history is important, indicating that they may have misunderstood or mistakenly answered the rating question. In their free responses respondents emphasized the importance of representation and inclusion demonstrated by quotes like:

“Representation is really important. Maybe coming out wouldn’t have been so hard if I was exposed to any LGBTQ history before I was an adult.”

“All members of society need to be represented in history museums, especially those that have been ignored by traditional history.”

“I believe it is so important to see LGBTQ+ history within the walls of a museum setting because it brings a sense of importance that we may not see in other settings. For years the LGBTQ+ community has had makeshift communities, settings, magazines, bars, parades, activist activities, all not supported by the government, so to see our history make it to a setting like a state museum means the world.”

“LGBTQ+ history is history. Full stop.”

These free-response quotes not only emphasize the overarching theme of the importance of representation, but also demonstrate how impactful inclusion in institutions, such as the state history museum, can be.

The History Colorado Center prides itself on being considered a museum for visitors of all ages with diverse programming from summer camps to educational lectures. As reviewed earlier, LGBTQ+ narratives and history are often excluded on the basis of institutions wanting to be “family-friendly” even if this concern is unfounded (Middleton 2022). As demonstrated by two of the free responses quotes above (“Lack of LGBTQ voices/stories in my kids’ classrooms,” and “My son recently identified as part of the LGBTQ community”), some visitors were parents who specifically sought out the LGBTQ+ history exhibit to better educate themselves or their children. Additionally, as seen in Figure 6.11, a portion of the survey respondents came to the exhibit with children. Importantly, this portion could be an underestimate, as parents with children may not have had the time to complete a survey during their visit. Moreover, during my participant observation at the museum, I spoke to one guest who brought the children she baby sat to *Rainbows and Revolutions* on opening day because the children specifically requested to see the exhibit.

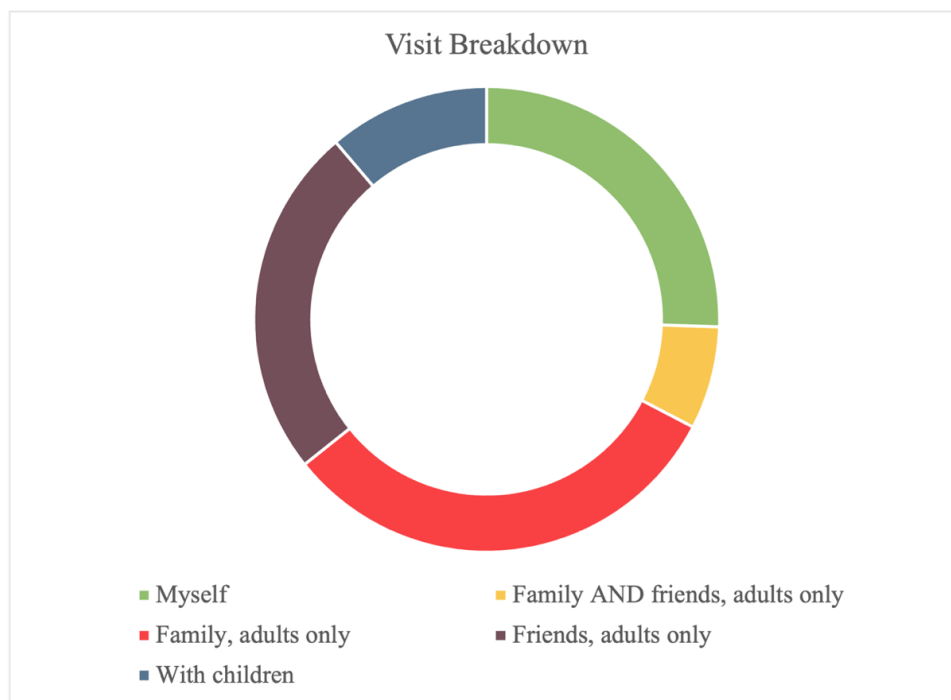


Figure 6.11: Breakdown of visitors by who they accompanied them to the exhibition via responses to the question: “Who did you come with today?”

These results reinforce the idea that excluding LGBTQ+ history on the basis of it not being “family friendly” is unsubstantiated.

## Chapter 7 : Post-Exhibit and Looking to the Future

Though my thesis work primarily focused on the development and the reception of the exhibition, following the theoretical framework of the New Museum Ethics as outlined by Janet Marstine and the conception that one-off exhibitions are not enough to illustrate a museum's commitment to historically underrepresented or marginalized communities (Marstine 2011, 11; Middleton 2017), I found it integral to document and outline in this paper various occurrences that took place after *Rainbows & Revolutions* opening. In this section, I highlight the opinions of staff who worked on the exhibition regarding what comes next for this exhibit and discuss ways in which History Colorado responded to initial critiques of the exhibit. The information in this section draws from my semi-structured interviews with staff, correspondence with staff post-exhibit, and participant observation through the attendance of workshops History Colorado held post-exhibit.

Though this exhibit was always planned to travel after its residency at the History Colorado Center, the project and Aaron Marcus' position were initially to be funded for two years by the Gill Foundation. Despite the original timeline of this project to end after an allotted amount of time, I was interested in investigating if History Colorado had any intentions to continue the contemporary collecting and documentation of Colorado's LGBTQ+ history or to find internal funding to continue Aaron Marcus' position.

Likewise, I was intrigued by the fate of this newly expanded collection if his position were to be terminated shortly after the exhibit opened. This topic of what the future holds for the preservation of LGBTQ+ history at History Colorado came up during multiple of my semi-structured interviews with staff. The topic was of particular significance during my conversation with Aaron Marcus. Marcus explained how despite the possibility of his position ending, he hoped this would not be the end of collecting, as the exhibition opening resulted in an overall influx of individuals interested in donating to the collection and having their piece of LGBTQ+ history preserved by the state institution (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022). Despite this influx of interest in donating to the collection and the overall positive media attention the exhibition drew towards History Colorado, when we spoke after the opening, Marcus noted the following:

I don't feel any excitement or urgency or need to continue this position [from History Colorado], which is slightly disheartening for me and for everybody who worked with me to make all this happen. I had many interns and volunteers who've gone on to great things now and they're a part of this too. And I feel like - well I don't feel like I'm letting everyone down, I feel like History Colorado is letting everyone down – Not to mention the LGBTQ+ community – if they just let this go away and let this collecting end. (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

Likewise, Aaron Marcus explained that if his position were to come to a halt, he felt the priority placed on collecting the underrepresented histories of the LGBTQ+ community would also cease to remain relevant at the institution and that this lack of priority could be potentially very damaging to History Colorado's newly established trust built with this exhibition.

I honestly believe – and I hate to say this, but it is what I believe – if this position goes away, this collecting is not a priority in this institution... I honestly do not think, even though as I just started to say I have told everybody here, people in positions of power here, that History Colorado has to keep this collecting going because they have, and I'm sorry for my language screwed over this community too many times... Bridges can only be rebuilt so many times and then that's it. And if it goes away this time, I think that's pretty much it for anything with the LGBTQ+ community. I just don't believe they'll keep buying this... If this position goes away, I don't feel this collecting is a priority here, which I'm not very happy about. (Aaron Marcus, Unpublished Interview Transcript, July 2022)

Aaron Marcus' uneasiness surrounding the continuation of this project and collecting initiative at the institution was echoed by other staff members at History Colorado. However, employees on the executive level did not share the same anxieties. Jason Hanson discussed during our interview how he hopes the collection project can continue and that if the institution does not have the funding for a targeted collecting

project on LGBTQ+ history, “it’s still part of every curator’s responsibility to make sure that [History Colorado] contin[ues] to focus on LGBTQ+ history” (Jason Hanson, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022). Furthermore, during my interview with Executive Director Dawn DiPrince she spoke very confidently about viewing *Rainbows & Revolutions* as a starting point, noting the following:

It’s really not the end, it’s the beginning, we should always think of exhibits as the beginning of a conversation. In some ways, they become this like physical form, that allows us to have this larger conversation with the community. And so that’s also the way I see this is it’s like, yeah, we didn’t have all the answers. We didn’t nail it 100%. But that’s because we’re just starting a conversation. (Dawn DiPrince, Unpublished Interview Transcript, August 2022)

Briefly, after the exhibit opened, Aaron Marcus had to begin splitting his time between his curatorial appointment and his previous job at History Colorado managing the imaging studio, allowing him considerably less time to focus on the influx of interest from the public to donate and further build the institutions LGBTQ+ collection. Though as I write this thesis in April 2023, Aaron Marcus still holds his title as Gill Foundation Associate Curator of LGBTQ+ History, it remains unclear if there has been any significant effort in securing internal or other external funding for his position to continue indefinitely.

As illustrated in my findings above, the exhibition received consistent critiques regarding the lack of diverse voices and intersectional representations. Though ambiguity exists surrounding the permeance of Aaron Marcus' position, History Colorado prioritized responding to these initial critiques almost immediately after the exhibit opened to the public. History Colorado's response to the lack of BIPOC LGBTQ+ stories involved organizing two separate "Black LGBTQ+ Community Memory Workshops." The goal of these workshops was for History Colorado to establish new relationships with members of the Black LGBTQ+ community in Colorado, specifically within Denver, and to work to fill the gaps present in the collection. I attended both of these workshops as a participant observer to understand the ways in which History Colorado was working to build these relationships.

The first workshop occurred on Tuesday, September 6, 2022, from 4:00-6:00 pm at the Buell Media Center in downtown Denver. While an assortment of History Colorado staff were present at the workshop, and a handful of people had preemptively signed up to attend, only one individual attended the workshop. Though there was only one attendee, the staff still went through the various memory recording exercises with the individual and gave them their full attention. The attendee present discussed how hosting the program on a weeknight beginning during work hours may have hindered folks from attending. Additionally, during a conversation I had with a staff member at History Colorado, they noted how they had spoken with older Black individuals who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, who were uncomfortable with the use of the term queer



in the flyer for the event and ultimately this influenced their decision not to attend (Personal Communication with History Colorado Staff, August 2022).

The second workshop occurred on Saturday, October 22, 2022, from 10:00 am-12:00 pm at the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance building located in Denver. Though History Colorado ensured to schedule the second workshop on a weekend and sought to use more inclusive language in their promotional materials, again, only one individual was in attendance. Once again, the staff present conducted the workshop and corresponding memory exercises with the one attendee. Although each workshop only had one individual present and History Colorado remains to have significant gaps that need filling concerning their LGBTQ+ collection, holding these two workshops was an essential first step, as it is integral that museums hold spaces for underrepresented communities to share their stories and their voices.

If History Colorado truly considers the *Rainbows & Revolutions* exhibition as a starting point, and they are serious about collecting more diverse LGBTQ+ stories. I personally hope we see the institution continue to invest in this project, the LGBTQ+ community, and the documentation and display of LGBTQ+ history by making the LGBTQ+ curator position permanent and continuing to frequently host events such as the “Black LGBTQ+ Community Memory Workshops.”

## **Chapter 8 : Conclusion**

This research project and corresponding thesis began with attempting to understand and gain insights into how a state history museum in the United States would go about incorporating historically neglected LGBTQ+ histories and objects into not only their collection but then develop an LGBTQ+ history exhibit from these objects. Additionally, once the collection and resulting exhibition opened, I sought to understand how the broader public felt about said incorporation and whether it would be met with opposition or enthusiasm that their state history museum had chosen to highlight LGBTQ+ history. In conducting this research, I approached these questions utilizing theoretical frameworks of critical museology and feminist and queer museum theories. I engaged in my research through the anthropological methods of museum ethnography, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and finally, a post-exhibition visitor survey.

The History Colorado Center, to collect, document, and preserve the state's diverse LGBTQ+ history, utilized external funding to establish a dedicated curator of LGBTQ+ history. This dedicated position was integral to the success the institution experienced in expanding the overall collection of LGBTQ+ materials from under 100 to over 500 objects. Though this collection expansion would likely not have been possible without this dedicated position, there were still a variety of challenges the institution

faced regarding the collection of LGBTQ+ histories. For example, my semi-structured interviews highlighted the difficulty the team experience while attempting to collect objects related to more marginalized members of the LGBTQ+ community. This difficulty could have been alleviated by staff having more time, increased access to resources, and more diverse staff. Notably, the presence of a dedicated LGBTQ+ curator does not automatically remove the historic distrust some communities may have towards cultural institutions due to the blatant exclusion of their stories, narratives, and histories in the not-so-far past.

Similar themes emerged when examining the exhibit development process of *Rainbows & Revolutions*. Overall, the team struggled to represent the entirety of the diverse LGBTQ+ community accurately. While this lack of diversity directly resulted from a lack of diversity in the collection, this issue was exacerbated by the lack of a community advisory board. The lack of a community advisory board was likely a result of the lack of time, resources, and early institutional investment the project received. The presence of a community advisory board could have ensured a more intersectional exhibition, which was one of the central critiques of the exhibition throughout my research. Another aspect of the exhibit planning process that proved difficult for History Colorado was reaching agreements on the intended audience of the exhibit and whether the institutions' commitments should be focused on accurately representing the community or creating receptive content for the general public.

Though History Colorado experienced numerous challenges during the collection and exhibition process, semi-structured interviews, overall attendance numbers, and the post-exhibit visitor survey indicate an overwhelmingly positive reception of the exhibition in the eyes of the public. Visitors indicated a high level of interest before viewing the exhibition, with numerous respondents indicating that they came to the museum specifically to see the exhibition. Additionally, after viewing the exhibit, most visitors reported having an excellent or outstanding experience. This high level of interest was consistent across members of the LGBTQ+ community as well as those outside. Alongside these positive views, visitors indicated various critiques of the exhibit. Among these critiques, the main themes revolved around the need for the exhibit to be larger, permanent, and overall more intersectional. These critiques were echoed by staff who worked on the project, indicating that History Colorado is aware of the urgency and need for inclusive permanent exhibitions and museum operations.

### **8.1 Limitations and Future Directions**

The research I conducted had a handful of limitations worth highlighting. One major limitation of this research is that it is possible that those who were highly opposed to the inclusion and display of LGBTQ+ history at History Colorado may have chosen not to attend the exhibit or fill out the survey. Therefore, my interpretations of the exhibit reception may be deficient in understanding particular perspectives. In addition, collecting feedback via online reviews or forums was beyond this project's scope. Still, reviewing online responses may have shed light on the presence of more negative responses targeted toward the exhibition.

Additionally, due to the focus of my research questions being centered on the collection and exhibit planning process and the public's reception of the exhibit, I did not perform content analysis or critically examine the layout, design, or objects chosen for the exhibition. Though my research was guided by the theoretical frameworks of queer and feminist museum theories, it fell outside my scope to employ these theoretical frameworks in the exhibit and its content. An avenue for further possible research may involve utilizing queer and feminist museum theory frameworks by turning a critical eye to the exhibition's physical content and layout to assess whether this exhibition is genuinely working to destabilize hegemonic structures in the museum space and further queer the museum.

Another major limitation is that my research was restricted to a short timeframe and concluded while the exhibit was still open, and its future remains unclear. While the data I collected illustrates that History Colorado currently honors a commitment to collecting and displaying the diverse stories of the LGBTQ+ community, we cannot establish that this commitment will not falter over time. Hosting one LGBTQ+ focused exhibition, while vastly important and representative of significant progress, does not necessarily indicate a long-term commitment to underrepresented communities such as the LGBTQ+ community. Genuine commitment includes not only the display of LGBTQ+ materials in permanent gallery spaces but also:

Museum-wide support of queer inclusion, both internally and externally. This means writing queer inclusion into the values statement of the institution, recruiting queer board members, and updating the collections policy to include the conscious collection...historical objects of queer significance. (Middleton 2017)

To understand the continuing implications and results of *Rainbows & Revolutions* and the museum's commitment to the LGBTQ+ community, a more comprehensive and long-term study is necessary.

*Rainbows & Revolutions* is currently set to travel once it closes at the History Colorado Center in the Summer of 2023. The city of Denver is one of Colorado's more politically progressive areas. In order to understand how the exhibit is received in varying parts of the state, further research could include disturbing the post-exhibit survey at each planned location for the exhibit's display. In conclusion, continued study into not only History Colorado's commitment to the community but how other audiences receive the exhibition would greatly benefit and build upon the research conducted for this thesis.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guides

#### *Staff Interview Guide*

1. Please state your name and describe your position at/association with History Colorado.
2. Do you identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community?
3. Please describe how you are involved with the LGBTQ+ History Exhibit/collecting initiative.
4. In your words, can you tell me when this project began, how this project began, what inspired the project, and how it is funded?
5. Do you believe that the preservation of LGBTQ+ history is important? Why or why not?
6. What do you personally believe is the importance of collecting and exhibiting LGBTQ+ history at a state history museum such as HCC?
7. Please describe the process of collecting items for the LGBTQ+ collection and exhibit and your involvement with this process?
  - a. Did you run into any struggles while collecting?
  - b. Did you find people were excited about donating to the exhibit? Why or why not?
8. What was the exhibit planning process like?
  - a. What did you find difficult about the process?
  - b. What did you find was most successful during the process?

9. How did HCC collaborate with the community on this project?
  - a. How could HCC have better collaborated with the community?
10. How do you feel about the final product of the exhibition?
  - a. Is there anything you would have done differently looking back?

*Object Donor Interview Guide*

1. Please state your name and pronouns.
2. Do you identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community?
3. What was your exposure to LGBTQ+ history growing up?
4. Do you believe that the preservation of LGBTQ+ history is important? Why or why not?
5. Do you personally believe there is importance in collecting and exhibiting LGBTQ+ history at a state history museum such as HCC?
6. How did you hear about History Colorado's project/exhibit?
7. Please describe your involvement with the LGBTQ+ history project + exhibit.
8. What item(s) did you donate to the collection?
9. Can you describe the process of donating your items and how you felt about it?
10. Did the item you donate make it into the exhibition?
  - a. If so, do you believe your story was represented accurately? Why or why not?
11. How do you feel about the final product of the exhibition?

## Appendix B: Post-Exhibit Survey

### Default Question Block

*Age.* Are you over the age of 18

Yes

No

### *Consent.* Implied Consent for Online Surveys

You are invited to participate in a research study of the History Colorado LGBTQ+ Exhibition Case Study. The purpose of this study is to gain insight into museum visitors' thoughts, experiences, and feelings on the LGBTQ+ Exhibit. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you visited the exhibit. If you decide to participate, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. If you decide to participate, complete the following survey. Your completion of this survey indicates your consent to participate in this research study. The survey is designed to record your thoughts on and reactions to the LGBTQ+ history exhibit. It will take about 5 to 10 minutes to complete. You will be asked to answer questions about basic demographic information, your exhibit enjoyment, and your attitudes on this LGBTQ+ history exhibit. No benefits accrue to you for answering the survey, but your responses will be used to inform research on the general public's interest in and reception of this exhibit and LGBTQ+ history. Any discomfort or inconvenience to you are minimal, but they are not expected to be any greater than anything you encounter in everyday life. If you experience any difficult feelings and need LGBTQ+ specific wellness resources please visit:



<https://lgbtqcolorado.org/resources/> . Data will be collected using the Internet; no guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third party. Confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relationships with the University of Denver or the History Colorado Center. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time; you may also skip questions if you don't want to answer them, or you may choose not to return the survey. Please feel free to ask questions regarding this study. You may contact me if you have additional questions at Madeline Ohaus, Department of Anthropology, [madeline.ohaus@du.edu](mailto:madeline.ohaus@du.edu). Dr. Kelly Fayard, [Kelly.fayard@du.edu](mailto:Kelly.fayard@du.edu), 303-871-2679. If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the University of Denver (DU) Institutional Review Board to speak to someone independent of the research team at (303) 871-2121, or email at [IRBAdmin@du.edu](mailto:IRBAdmin@du.edu).

De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community at large to advance science and health. We will remove or code any personal information that could identify you before files are shared with other researchers to ensure that, by current scientific standards and known methods, no one will be able to identify you from the information we share. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee anonymity of your personal data.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,  
Madeline Ohaus University of Denver Department of Anthropology Museum and Heritage Studies  
Dr. Kelly Fayard, Ph.D. Assistant Professor Department of Anthropology

By clicking the link below, I confirm that I have read this form and decided that I will

participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can discontinue participation at any time. My consent also indicates that I am at least 18 years of age. [Please email [madeline.ohaus@du.edu](mailto:madeline.ohaus@du.edu) if you wish to receive a copy of this consent form to print for your own records.]

I agree to participate ([link to survey](#))

I decline ([link to close webpage](#))

*visit\_reason*. Please tell us which option most closely fits your reason for visiting the History Colorado Center today.

I came to the museum to specifically see the LGBTQ+ exhibit.

I knew about the LGBTQ+ exhibit, but it is just one part of my museum visit today

I didn't know about the LGBTQ+ exhibit but decided to visit while I was here.

*LGBTQ\_reason*. Can you describe what drew you to see the LGBTQ+ History exhibit?

*interest*. Before you visited the exhibit, how would you describe your general level of interest in learning about LGBTQ+ history in Colorado?

Very interested

Somewhat interested

Not at all interested

*experience.* Please rate your Overall Experience with the LGBTQ+ History exhibit.

- Poor
- Fair
- Good
- Excellent
- Outstanding

*experience\_written.* Please explain what would have made the exhibit "outstanding" for you.

*LGBTQ\_history\_agree.* Please rate your agreement with the following statement:  
I believe LGBTQ+ history is important and should be included in museums.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

*LGBTQ\_history\_text.* Please explain your selection for the previous question

*expectations.* Did the exhibit meet your expectations? Please describe why or why

not.

*see\_more*. In the exhibit, what would you like to see more of?

*see\_less*. In the exhibit, what would you like to see less of?

*message*. In your own words, what was the main message of the exhibition?

*new\_thing*. Please tell us one thing you saw in this exhibit that you didn't know about before.

*missing\_thing*. Is there anything we didn't cover that you think is important for the museum to know about your visit or your thoughts about the LGBTQ+ History exhibit?

Q25. The following questions cover basic demographic information. All questions are optional.

*Orientation* . Sexual orientation: How do you identify? Select all that apply.

- Asexual
- Bisexual
- Fluid
- Gay
- Heterosexual or Straight
- Pansexual
- Lesbian
- Queer
- Questioning or unsure
- Same-gender loving

Prefer to self-describe:

Prefer not to answer

*Gender*. Gender: How do you identify? Select all that apply.

- Agender
- Demigender
- Genderqueer or genderfluid
- Man
- Nonbinary
- Questioning or unsure
- Transgender man (trans man)
- Transgender woman (trans woman)
- Two-Spirit (2-S)
- Woman

Prefer to self-describe:

Prefer not to answer

*AgeRange.* What is your age range?

18 - 24

25 - 34

35 - 44

45 - 54

55 - 64

65 - 74

75 - 84

85 or older

Prefer not to answer

*Ethnicity.* Race and Ethnicity: How do you identify? Select all that apply.

African, African-American, or Black

American Indian, Native American, or Alaskan Native

Asian or Asian-American, or Filipino

Latino, Latinx, Hispanic, Chicano, or Latin American

Middle Eastern, Arab, or Arab-American

Native Hawaiian

Pacific Islander

Jewish American

White, or European American

Multi-racial or more than one identity

Prefer to self-describe

Prefer not to answer

*museum\_visits.* How often do you visit museums? These might include art, science, history, zoos, or other museums.

I haven't been to a museum in the past 2 years

About once a year

About 2 to 4 times a year

About 5 or more times a year

*HCCmember.* Are you a member of History Colorado?

No

Yes

*VisitWith.* Who did you come with today?

Myself

Family, adults only

Friends, adults only

Family AND friends, adults only

With children

Prefer not to answer

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