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Résumé de l'article

Il n'est pas impossible que des objets jouent un rôle déterminant dans des expositions muséales favorisant la réflexion critique sur des questions relatives aux droits de la personne et à l'injustice sociale. Les objets sont susceptibles de présenter des expériences de vie qui ont été marginalisées beaucoup trop longtemps et d'échapper aux explications répétées. En même temps, ils peuvent également susciter l'intérêt des visiteurs par la création d'un lien affectif qui les amènera à prêter attention aux histoires présentées. À partir d'un examen des archives et du musée d'histoire de la GLBT Historical Society, à San Francisco, l'auteure avance que de nouveaux musées issus d'archives communautaires parviendront sans doute à stimuler la réflexion critique à partir d'objets, un genre de réflexion rarement inspiré par les musées d'envergure nationale qui tentent d'aborder des problèmes sociaux. En s'attardant à l'exposition inaugurale du GLBT History Museum, « Our Vast Queer Past », l'auteure affirme que l'organisation d'objets en montre, grandement influencée par les racines archivistiques de ceux-ci, donne aux visiteurs l'occasion de rencontres fortuites avec des récits qui gagnent en importance auprès d'eux.

# The Explosion in Grandma's Attic, the Cabinet of Curiosities, and Chance Encounters at the GLBT History Museum

TAMARA DE SZEGHEO LANG

## *Abstract*

*This article proposes that objects might be instrumental in museum exhibitions that promote critical thinking around issues of human rights and social inequity. Objects have the potential to present histories that have been marginalized for far too long and to get away from rehearsed narratives, while also engaging the visitor through emotional connection — making the visitor care about the histories that are being presented. In looking at the GLBT Historical Society Archives and History Museum in San Francisco, this article claims that new museums that grow out of community-based archives might provide the opportunity for the kinds of critical engagements with objects that national-scale museums that attempt to address social problems often do not have. Specifically addressing the GLBT History Museum's inaugural exhibit, "Our Vast Queer Past," this article argues that the organization of objects on display, greatly influenced by their archival roots, gives viewers the opportunity for chance encounters with histories that come to matter to them.*

## *Résumé*

*Il n'est pas impossible que des objets jouent un rôle déterminant dans des expositions muséales favorisant la réflexion critique sur des questions relatives aux droits de la personne et à l'injustice sociale. Les objets sont susceptibles de présenter des expériences de vie qui ont été marginalisées beaucoup trop longtemps et d'échapper aux explications répétées. En même temps, ils peuvent également susciter l'intérêt des visiteurs par la création d'un lien affectif qui les amènera à prêter attention aux histoires présentées. À partir d'un examen des archives et du musée d'histoire de la GLBT Historical Society, à San Francisco, l'auteure avance que de nouveaux musées issus d'archives communautaires parviendront sans doute à stimuler la réflexion critique à partir d'objets, un genre de réflexion*

*rarement inspiré par les musées d'envergure nationale qui tentent d'aborder des problèmes sociaux. En s'attardant à l'exposition inaugurale du GLBT History Museum, « Our Vast Queer Past », l'auteure affirme que l'organisation d'objets en montre, grandement influencée par les racines archivistiques de ceux-ci, donne aux visiteurs l'occasion de rencontres fortuites avec des récits qui gagnent en importance auprès d'eux.*

On 27 September 2014 the Canadian Museum for Human Rights opened to the public in Winnipeg, Manitoba. With an explicit mission to “enhance the public’s understanding of human rights, to promote respect for others and to encourage reflection and dialogue,” the museum presents a number of stories about the evolution of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) rights and activism in a Canadian, as well as global, context.<sup>1</sup> The museum has thus far been heavily critiqued for the inclusions, absences, and representations within its walls and it would be easy to similarly critique who and what is included in the LGBTQ-specific content, and who and what is left out.<sup>2</sup> More relevant to this article, however, is the question of how these stories come to be exhibited in the museum space.

The museum has been lauded for its commitment to promoting “reflection and dialogue” in its visitors around issues of human rights and *National Post* reporter, Joseph Brean, claims “few visitors are likely to leave [the museum] with their pre-conceptions intact.”<sup>3</sup> However, in trying to create a space of introspection, reflection, and critical thinking, the museum has tended toward the prioritization of ideas over objects, presenting 60 percent of the content through digital means.<sup>3</sup> Digital content, which is seen to engage the visitor in ways that material objects no longer do, has increasingly been used to promote interactivity within museum programming.<sup>4</sup> However, this interactive, digital focus means that, according to Brean, “it is not a museum of beautiful things to look at ... it is not even a museum ‘of’ anything, preferring the activist focus of being a museum ‘for’ human rights. It is devoted to an idea, and as such, it seems unsure what exactly it is for.”<sup>5</sup> While Brean does not necessarily intend this comment as a critique of the museum, his

words echo the concerns of many scholars in the field of Museum Studies who worry that new museums devoted to social justice topics might be straying too far from the more traditional model of the museum, with its focus on the display of objects.

Writing in 1971, museum studies scholar Duncan Cameron claims that museums are facing an “identity crisis,” unclear of their evolving role in an ever-changing society.<sup>6</sup> In his 2009 book, historian Steven Conn contends that this typically comes at the expense of historic objects.<sup>7</sup> He argues that “The success of these museums does not depend on objects on display, because objects are largely secondary to the museums’ strategies.”<sup>8</sup> Education scholar Ann Chinnery expands on this argument when she writes, “In the new museums of ideas, objects and artifacts have been replaced by photographic exhibitions, audiovisual installations, and interactive technologies. The traditional inward focus on collection-building and preservation, and museum education as contemplation, has given way to an outward focus on people and ideas, and museum education as discussion and dialogue.”<sup>9</sup> I do not want to diminish the role that interactive, digital content can play in the engagement of museum visitors. Instead, I want to argue that objects are often overlooked for their potential to *also* engage the visitor and promote critical discussion of social issues.

This article proposes that objects might be instrumental in a project that advocates the kind of contemplation and critical thinking that the Canadian Museum for Human Rights claims that it strives for. Objects have the potential to present histories that have been marginalized for far too long and to get away from rehearsed narratives, while also engaging the visitor through emotional connection — making the visitor care about the histories that are being presented. In looking at the GLBT Historical Society (GLBTHS) Archives and History Museum in San Francisco, it claims that new museums that grow out of community-based archives might provide the opportunity for the kinds of critical engagements with objects that the national-scale museums often do not have. Further, it argues that their organization of objects, greatly influenced by their archival roots, gives viewers the opportunity for chance encounters with histories that come to matter to them.

## Queer Archives, Queer Archival Objects

We find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought. The notion of evocative objects brings together these two less familiar ideas, underscoring the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things. We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with.

- Sherry Turkle<sup>10</sup>

Many scholars have now written on how queer institutions, such as the GLBTHS Archives, become repositories of both traditional archival holdings, including manuscripts and letters, and unusual types of items that one would not normally find in institutional archives, such as pornography, sex toys, and underwear stained with menstrual blood.<sup>11</sup> Like many other identity-based or activist archives, the GLBTHS Archives tend to prioritize objects that represent histories that are not often preserved in traditional institutional archives, including histories of “ordinary” or non-famous people, of emotionally-evocative experiences of community-formation and violent oppression, and of sexual acts and gender performances.<sup>12</sup> Cultural theorist Ann Cvetkovich, for instance, describes these archives as “often ‘magical’ collections ... that represent far more than the literal value of the objects themselves.”<sup>13</sup> For Cvetkovich, the “magic” lies both in the ways that objects are chosen for inclusion in archival collections and in the ways they are interpreted within the archives. These processes are linked to both personal memory and affective attachment on the part of donors, archivists, and archives users.

Archives librarian Aimee Brown charts how many community LGBTQ archives have relied on donations of personal collections preserved by, in her words, queer “pack rats.”<sup>14</sup> The remains of decades of queer personal, public, and political lives

are chosen by the people themselves, offering an emotional reading of what in life is worth preserving. In the face of social stigma that has led to an underrepresentation of queerness in many sites of historical conservation, in part because many families destroy the remnants of queer individuals' lives, this collection process becomes even more significant.<sup>15</sup> For example, at the Lesbian Herstory Archives the only collection criterion is that the donated material is significant to a 'lesbian'; the meaning of significance (and of lesbian) is defined by the donor.<sup>16</sup> Many queer archival objects are not acquired and assessed for inclusion by archivists using typical criteria of worth, but rather by criteria of worth as defined by donors, community members, and volunteers. As Cvetkovich explains, "their principles of selection and inclusion are not the same as those of a public research archive that defines value according to historical or research interests."<sup>17</sup> Instead, objects are deemed valuable because of their personal relations to those who chose to donate them; the LGBTQ community represents itself as opposed to being represented by archival professionals.<sup>18</sup> In this process of self-representation, as Cvetkovich explains, "sentimental value is taken seriously as a rationale for acquisition in the gay and lesbian archive."<sup>19</sup>

Because queer archival collections, like other social history collections, are accepted based on their significance to community members, they often include items that would not normally be housed in more traditional archives thanks to either their relationship to "ordinary" people or their links to gender and sexuality. For example, the collections of the GLBTHS Archives in San Francisco include hundreds of matchbooks from gay bars, a twelve-foot neon sign from Finocchio's drag club, an antique vibrator that was donated by the owner's son, the suit Harvey Milk was wearing when he was shot (donated by his lover), and large panels from a mural that hung inside the Bulldog bath house.<sup>20</sup>

These objects, once in the archives, do not cease to be emotionally important but instead make the archives themselves affectively rich spaces for their visitors. Indeed, many archives users have recounted how they feel captivated by certain queer

archival objects — because of beauty, strangeness, or back story — and how these affective experiences have influenced their relationships to queer histories. In stumbling (sometimes literally) over these emotional objects, researchers often experience chance encounters in the archives that can direct research toward new topics or frame research in new ways. As Turkle claims in the epigraph to this section, these objects can highlight “the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things.”<sup>21</sup> Though emotional accounts of archival research rarely make it into published historical works, the romance of the archive is a story often shared among historians.<sup>22</sup>

As many people who have done research in archives will acknowledge, the material conditions of both the space of the archives and the archival materials themselves are often intense factors in the research process.<sup>23</sup> As Jacqueline Holler asserted at the 2012 Canadian Historical Association meeting, “we all know the excitement of entering the archive after a long absence; the reluctance to quit and resentment of closing times when we see something swimming toward us through the dusty pages; the elevated heart rate and flushed cheeks in those moments we find something really good.”<sup>24</sup> Holler evokes here the bodily response to being drawn to the space of the archives and, more specifically, to the archival objects that one might not have even known they were searching for. Historian Joan Scott similarly sees the archival search as an “extraordinary pleasure” and writes that “Part of the fun of archival research is guessing what might be found in a box of papers whose label is seemingly irrelevant to the inquiry at hand.”<sup>25</sup> In these moments and in these mysteries, one can get taken in by both dusty pages and dusty spaces.

Community-run archives especially, so often located in homes or in homey spaces, are evocative upon entrance.<sup>26</sup> As Cvetkovich describes, the Lesbian Herstory Archives, which reside in a brownstone in Brooklyn, is “organized as a domestic space in which all lesbians will feel welcome to see and touch a lesbian legacy.”<sup>27</sup> The objects that find their way to these archives, in their form as well as content, are also often evocative in a similar way. The feel of creases in an aged newsletter, the visuality



of the faded ink on a handwritten letter, the beauty of art works from the past, the warmth of a well-worn t-shirt, it is sometimes the sensory — the visual, the tactile — that draws researchers toward certain objects that then come to influence and direct their interest in history research and writing. In the words of Turkle, as quoted above, “we think with the objects we love and we love the objects we think with.”<sup>28</sup> Often the initial lack of knowledge about the specifics of the object — when it was made, used, or found; who owned, used, or encountered it; why it was saved, modified, or discarded — allows the researcher to consider multiple interpretations that enable captivation. According to Scott, “The point is that the archive is a provocation; its contents offer an endless resource for thinking and rethinking.”<sup>29</sup> A researcher might become obsessed with certain objects because of identifications or dis-identifications with the people affiliated with the objects; because of the colour, texture, or shape of the object; or because of the mystery that surrounds the object with its lack of contextualization in the archives.

However, these affective experiences with objects in the archives most often involve people whom you would expect to find spending a great deal of time in these spaces, namely historians and other researchers. I want to explore what might be happening when we put these affective objects into the hands of the non-researcher, into the hands of broad publics. I am interested in tracing these emotion-laden archival objects as they make their way from the archival space — generally set up for researchers — to the museum, where the target audience is a broad public without significant pre-existing knowledge of the histories being displayed.

### The GLBT Historical Society Archives

The GLBT Historical Society Archives has always been invested in bringing archival objects to public audiences. Founded in 1985, and initially housed in the apartment of Willie Walker, the GLBTHS Archives began collecting materials related especially to San Francisco and Bay Area LGBTQ histories.<sup>30</sup> From the time



of its founding, however, members of the Society were considering the importance of education that these histories could perform through their exhibition. Gerard Koskovich, co-curator of the exhibit “Our Vast Queer Past” and early Society member, recounts:

The first issue of the newsletter published the results from the survey that was handed out at the founding meeting [of the GLBTHS]. We each filled out a little form about what our interests are, and what we’d most like to work on, and what we think the organization should be doing. It was roughly two thirds [of those in attendance] said archives and one third said museums/exhibitions. So, that early on, already people were saying we need to be telling these stories, not just collecting them. And we need to be showing these things, not just putting them in a box.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the past 30 years, alongside the GLBTHS Archives’ extensive collecting, a number of public exhibits have been mounted and many of them have made use of the archival holdings. The GLBTHS Archives is one of the better stocked in North America with 22,000 linear feet of materials including more than 4,000 periodical titles, 80,000 photographs, and 2,000 hours of audio and film recordings.<sup>32</sup> The collecting work of the GLBTHS aligns with the previous comments made about queer archives with regard to the collection of objects: according to “Our Vast Queer Past” co-curator Don Romesburg, “while many archives focus mostly on manuscripts and photographs, the GLBT Historical Society has collected objects and textiles essential for dynamic and compelling museum exhibition.”<sup>33</sup> These objects range from iconic items, including Harvey Milk’s collection and the sewing machine that was used to construct the first rainbow flag, to the many articles of clothing, shoes, and private journals left behind by those whose names and histories are less recognizable.<sup>34</sup> These everyday and ordinary objects have been some of the strongest in illustrating a diverse and captivating queer history, and often used in the various public exhibits mounted in archival spaces.

In 2003, the archives moved to a new location at 657 Mission Street that would provide them with a dedicated exhibition space.<sup>35</sup> A few years later, in 2008, artist E.G. Crichton volunteered to be the historical society's first artist-in-residence. In this role, she curated the exhibit "Lineage: Matchmaking in the Archive," which ran for four months in 2009.<sup>36</sup> For the exhibit, she chose collections left behind by queer people who were not famous and who were no longer alive. She paired each of these collections with an artist who then invented a response to the collection. Many of these artists established personal connections with those who were dead through the everyday objects left behind. Performer and writer Domonika Bednarska felt a particular connection to a moth-eaten hat worn by disability activist Diane Hugaert. Filmmaker Bill Domonkos fixated on a handwritten poem by World War II flight instructor Helen Harder, with an ink stain on it.<sup>37</sup> This exhibit highlighted the power inherent in everyday objects to forge connections between people today and in the past. In Crichton's own words, "spending time with the archive of someone who has died is an intense and intimate process. There is an ineffable sadness in looking through the materials that is directly autobiographical. Someone else's artifacts makes us think of our own, and we weave a narrative to cement the link."<sup>38</sup>

Despite the success of exhibits such as "Lineage" and even with the space afforded by the new building, it was clear that the archives, on the second floor of a building near the business district, was not garnering the kind of walk-in attention that was desired for a proper exhibition space.<sup>39</sup> In late 2008, the GLBTHS had the chance to mount a year long "pop-up museum" in the infamous Castro district of San Francisco at 499 Castro Street. This nicely coincided with the release of Gus Van Sant's popular film, *Milk*, a biopic on the Castro-based life of gay politician Harvey Milk.<sup>40</sup> Widely successful and attracting San Francisco natives and tourists alike, the pop-up museum cemented a desire for the GLBTHS to create a standalone museum with more permanence that could attract both heterosexual and queer visitors who might have little to no knowledge of LGBTQ histories.

## The GLBT History Museum

The GLBT History Museum opened in 2011 near the site of the pop-up museum at 4127 18<sup>th</sup> Street in San Francisco. In its first three years, the museum hosted approximately 30,000 visitors.<sup>41</sup> Unlike many new museums with an explicit activist mission, however, objects did not become secondary to narrative in its inaugural exhibit entitled “Our Vast Queer Past,” which was on display from January 2011 until March 2014. In fact, as Yelp reviewer “Johnny H.” describes of his visit to the museum: “It did feel like a tour through a garage sale” with “video montage, memorabilia, letters, photos, clothing, and what-not” representing gay life in historic contexts.<sup>42</sup>

Romesburg explains that museum visitors often share one of two complaints — the first being that the museum should be bigger, a wish that we all might have were resources more abundant. The second complaint is that there are too many objects contained in the museum — that it feels like a garage sale or, as Koskovich likes to say, like an “explosion in grandma’s attic.”<sup>43</sup> Romesburg further explains, “in terms of visitor reception, results of this approach have been mixed. Of forty-three comments on four visitor websites (such as Yelp), six complain that the approach is ‘random’, ‘confusing’, or ‘lacking organization’, while ten appreciate it as ‘thematic’, ‘well-organized’, or ‘jampacked’.”<sup>44</sup>

These ‘thing-filled’ spaces need not be considered in a negative light. This difficulty experienced by visitors has been identified by all three of the principal co-curators as a weakness of their exhibit, albeit a weakness that they have mixed feelings about. However, there might be a power in this messiness, in this explosion, even in the discomfort that some visitors feel with it. In these moments of difficulty, there might lie a potential for a different kind of learning — one that is less based on knowledge transmission and more on feeling or an affective pull toward certain objects, and thus certain histories. This is not an exhibit committed to ensuring that the visitor learns *the* history of San Francisco’s gay past, but rather *feels* one or many of its histories.

It is true that the museum was packed with objects during the public exhibition of “Our Vast Queer Past.”<sup>45</sup> Objects filled the three exhibition spaces — a small hallway gallery, a smaller corner gallery, and the main room where artefacts lined the walls, sat in the centre of the room, and hung from the ceiling. Near the entrance of the museum in the hallway gallery were a number of artefacts that represent histories that might be recognizable to many — gay politician Harvey Milk’s kitchen table and knick-knacks sat next to the wedding pantsuits worn by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, two of the original members of the homophile organization Daughters of Bilitis. Behind these, against the wall, was a panel from the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. These recognizable objects helped usher visitors into broader queer histories by giving them a knowable, and known, anchor to what they were about to encounter.

As Romesburg explains, “people will come for Milk,” so the curators placed the case about Harvey Milk near the entrance to the museum. He says, “If the Milk stuff was the first stuff that people would encounter, they could kind of relax after that. And it was *literally* like this jumping off point, where you start in the place that you know. You already arrive thinking you know everything there is to know, right, which is Harvey Milk’s gay history, right? And then you go from that moment into this whole other world.”<sup>46</sup> In helping visitors to “relax” by seeing the famous histories that are expected in a museum such as this one, these recognizable histories — Milk, homophiles, and AIDS activism — ushered the visitor into the main gallery space where, until 2014, the semi-permanent exhibit “Our Vast Queer Past” decorated the large, concrete room. In some ways, this main exhibition space felt very familiar — plexi-glass cases lined the walls, luxurious costumes sat on dress forms in corners, and museum didactics accompanied the cases. However, in other ways its form and content were not so familiar.

The cozy 1,600 square foot space held cases organized around 22 different themes, such as “Queers of Color Organizing,” “Bath Houses,” and “Lesbian Sex Wars,” each filled with a variety of objects: whether newspaper clippings, knick knacks,



Figure 1: “Our Vast Queer Past” exhibit at the GLBT History Museum, 2014

pieces of clothing, sex toys, towels, or tarot cards. The objects housed in “grandma’s attic,” however, did not make their debut in the museum but were imbued with both the emotional character and the organization of their previous home in the GLBTHS Archives. After all, one of the primary goals of the museum was to showcase the varied items that resided in the archives, which are often only visited by researchers. Romesburg explains that “the museum was to showcase the archives’ depth and breadth, attract new collections, engage the public with the importance of queer history and powerful exhibitions linking past and present.”<sup>47</sup> In this way, the museum intended both to present the archival materials to the public as an education tool and to directly encourage monetary and archival donations that would benefit the archives.

The creation of “Our Vast Queer Past” was certainly intrinsically tied to the archives. The three primary co-curators, along with others, spent a great deal of time pouring over the contents of the GLBTHS Archives. As Koskovich recounts, because over 50 percent of the archival materials had not yet been processed

at the time, the curators thought, "Let's actually get our noses into every last box of this place and find out what's in here cause there are going to be things we can show, stories we can tell that we have no idea about."<sup>48</sup> In looking through the boxes, the curators experienced many exciting chance encounters with objects they had no idea existed, including the discovery of letters and postcards written by well-known sexologist Alfred Kinsey, writer Christopher Isherwood, and historian Jonathan Ned Katz. Other chance encounters were more personal.

Romesburg describes an encounter he had with an overhead transparency that shows a map of San Francisco marked with red dots representing the locations of assaults on LGBTQ people in 1979 and 1980. He discovered this transparency while looking through an otherwise unremarkable grant proposal binder for the organization, "Community United Against Violence" and was immediately drawn to it. As he says, "I just started thinking about who all these dots were! And just feeling this, this kind of, I don't know, sadness, is too superficial but, just this sort of how important it was that this marking was happening."<sup>49</sup> He continues, "I knew all this history before, but it made me feel it in a more visceral sense."<sup>50</sup>

The transparency was magnified and placed as the top of one of the plexi-glass cases, which represented the theme of "Bearing the Scars: Violence & Trauma." The black lines representing San Francisco streets and the red dots representing attacks became haunting shadows on the archival objects housed below, and left the museum visitor — instead of the curator — captivated by its strange beauty, either curious at the lives it represents or, perhaps, totally uninterested.

Though the GLBT Historical Society has always promoted public encounters with its archives and archival objects, a museum offers more opportunity for chance encounters with objects on display and with the histories they represent, such as Romesburg's own experience during his research for the museum exhibit.<sup>51</sup> The geographical setting of the museum in the heart of the Castro district makes it accessible to passersby who might not have an already established interest in history, including locals,





Figure 2: Aspects of the “Bearing the Scars” case at the GLBT History Museum, 2014

tourists, queer people, non-queer people, and school groups.<sup>52</sup> For the most part, the people who get the opportunity to make contact with these captivating objects are not those who would usually visit community archives. Unlike visitors' experiences in many modern museums, the way "Our Vast Queer Past" staged these archival objects was also reminiscent of the experience of archival encounters.

## Grandma's Attic, the Cabinet, and Wondrous Objects

Resisting a master narrative, “Our Vast Queer Past” did not provide visitors with a timeline and the themed cases were not organized in a chronological order. Because of this, the cases sometimes brought many objects into strange juxtapositions where visitors could quickly skip between time periods, geographic locations, and sexual or gender identities in the small spaces between objects. Because of both the number and the

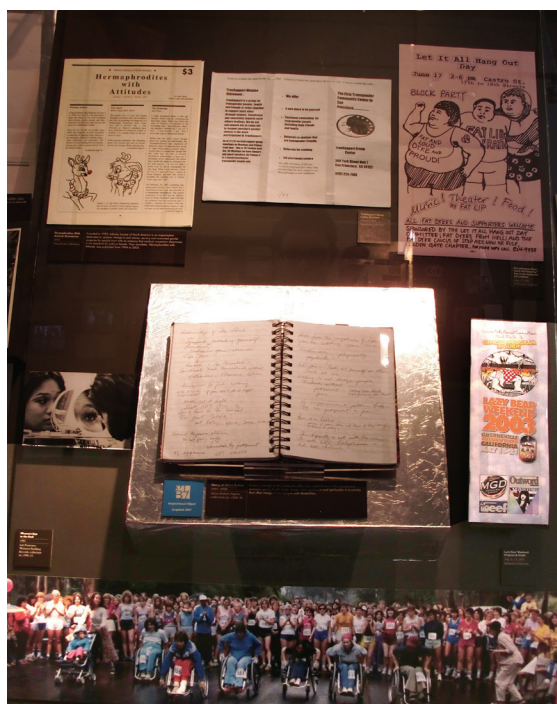


THE EXPLOSION IN GRANDMA'S ATTIC, THE CABINET OF CURIOSITIES,  
AND CHANCE ENCOUNTERS AT THE GLBT HISTORY MUSEUM

diversity of objects, each case created a messy story to which it was difficult for the visitor to assign an easy narrative, which was one of the exhibit's goal.

For example, one object that visitors might have found in “Our Vast Queer Past” was a handwritten journal by singer and activist Silvia Kohan documenting very personal feelings about sexuality and society’s treatment of people with disabilities. This was not a general history of disability rights activism, but rather a very intimate and personal way that visitors could get closer to another person’s life. Kohan’s journal became the catalyst for the themed case, “Body Politics: Questioning the Ideal.” In this case, the curators brought together objects that relate to not only people with physical disabilities but also fat activism, transgender embodiment, and gay men’s bear subculture. Through the juxtaposition of objects that represent numerous identity categories and time periods, visitors were encouraged to make their own stories and ask their own questions about cultural and subcultural body norms. Further, the abundance of different kinds of

Figure 3: Some objects included in the “Body Politics” case at the GLBT History Museum, 2014



objects in the case and even sometimes its appearance of disorder gave the visitor the opportunity to be surprised by what they had found there — to have chance encounters like the curators had in the archives.

Structured without much written context or set narratives, the exhibit welcomed an experience akin to searching through the archives where researchers need to decipher the fragmented histories they encounter. Similarly, with its focus on the display of surprising and wondrous objects over narrative coherence, it was also somewhat reminiscent of the Renaissance cabinets of curiosities. By now, many museums studies scholars have traced the history of the modern museum to its roots in private homes as so-called “cabinets of curiosities.” Cabinets of curiosities, owned by wealthy Europeans, brought together collections of natural science and anthropological artifacts collected from around the world and often chosen for their strange or shocking nature. The objects would be combined in these often literal cabinets in highly subjective ways, mixing objects from different eras and cultures in a manner that was far from being scientific.

As sociologist Tony Bennett explains of the cabinets, “since the relations between objects were not subtended by any classificatory logic, they could be cohered into an order only provisionally through a dialogic social practice.”<sup>53</sup> The point of these spaces was not to present a fully formed narrative, but rather a flexible one based on careful contemplation of unknown objects and discussion between the owners of collections and their guests. These spaces became places of affective response such as shock, interest, and imagination.

In the eighteenth century many of these private collections, which had been only accessible to some of the wealthiest and most privileged members of society, moved to public institutions such as the Louvre in Paris.<sup>54</sup> Though the seemingly disorganized nature of cabinets of curiosities became much more ordered in the process, objects — and quite a few of them — were still the focus of these museums for some time to come. As Conn explains, “the museums of the late nineteenth century used a strategy of visual abundance to underscore whatever story they

set out to tell.”<sup>55</sup> Facing many objects, the visitors were not presented with only one cohesive story.

As time went on, objects were used to tell a very specific, and scientific, story. The number of objects presented decreased with the belief that each one ought to be integral to the telling of the history.<sup>56</sup> What contributed further to this quest for clarity, was the increasing prominence of written labels, which were tasked with quickly showing visitors exactly why an object had been chosen and how it was significant to the history presented.<sup>57</sup> In accordance with Enlightenment ideals, these museums were interested in presenting what was deemed to be a universal truth. Consequently, those who curated the exhibits did not need to be explicitly recognized, while multiple interpretations surrounding the chosen objects and their organization were discouraged.

Conn argues that as the pedagogic goals of museums increased, the use of objects declined.<sup>58</sup> To contrast “modern” and “pre-modern” museums, Bennett explains that the earlier “pre-modern museums were more concerned to create surprise or provoke wonder,” which meant creating displays aimed at a “sensational rather than a rational and pedagogic effect.”<sup>59</sup> However, the sensational does not need to be placed in opposition to the pedagogic.

In conversation with this history, education scholar Ann Chinnery argues “for a revival of the kind of museum education that characterized the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century- museum experience, in which visitors had direct experiences with rooms full of objects with little or no explanatory documentation to mediate their encounters.”<sup>60</sup> In provoking a sense of wonder, museums and museum objects can create a sense of interest in the pedagogic aspects of not only learning about, but also deeply contemplating the diverse, complicated, and oftentimes difficult histories that institutions such as the GLBT History Museum present to their visitors.

As museums became more and more focused on the education of visitors, they have used objects as tools or evidence in their telling of narrative stories of the past. Objects, in this case, are used primarily as illustrative of, or complementary to, the

text-based information displayed that provides the object with context.<sup>61</sup> While many people are used to learning history through narrative, or text-based stories, objects are able to function on many levels, not just the narrative. In fact, in early museums, objects were used precisely to escape the dependence on books and schools to teach broad publics, including those without access to such narrative-based forms of learning.<sup>62</sup> As museum studies scholar Sandra Dudley describes, before reading about the history that is associated with the object, there is a potential for museum visitors, like archival researchers, to be drawn to the object for a variety of reasons including texture, colour, or size.<sup>63</sup> In describing one of her own instances of being drawn to a museum object that she knew little about, Dudley writes, “because I was already emotionally receptive to the artefact, I had an empathic as well as purely cognitive response to, and thus a greater interest in, its history.”<sup>64</sup> Personal connection to an object can change one’s relation to, and interest in, histories.

This depends, at least partially, on what Dudley calls the object-subject relationship which describes the highly subjective way in which an object will be experienced. Not only does the museum visitor bring to this relationship their own life histories, which will shape how an object is received intellectually and emotionally, but the sensory dimensions of the relationship — both the physicality of the object and the sensorial actions of seeing, smelling, or touching it. These varied responses to objects are what the archival space can sometimes facilitate, since narrative history is so rarely provided as a way of contextualizing the many and varied objects that are found there.

Museums do not, however, always allow for these diverse uses. As Dudley cautions, “museums’ preference for the informational over the material, and for learning over personal experience more broadly and fundamentally conceived, may risk the production of displays which inhibit and even preclude such affective responses.”<sup>65</sup> While museums tend toward the informational, Dudley advocates a move toward the material and the sensory, toward a museum with the object and its potential for affective response at its centre.<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, Stephen Greenblatt proposes two types of museum exhibition styles: one that promotes wonder and one that promotes resonance. For Greenblatt, wonder is “the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention.”<sup>67</sup> This arresting reaction, however, revolves around the object alone, out of its context. Resonance, on the other hand, is “the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand.”<sup>68</sup> In other words, resonance invokes in the viewer an interest in, and understanding of, the context — social, political, affective, or otherwise — of the object. Greenblatt concludes his article by advocating a strong combination of the two strategies: a good museum exhibit should first invoke a sense of wonder, which then leads to, or inspires, a sense of resonance.

This model is something that “Our Vast Queer Past” accomplished well. Although there was necessarily an informational quality to the exhibit, the many objects on display were not accompanied by much descriptive text. In addition, though the objects were grouped into cases that represented broad themes, the exhibit did not try to present an overarching, cohesive narrative. As Koskovich explains:

we don't have a master narrative, although there are a series of sub-narratives, and of narratives that can interlink ... [We] help guide people toward that kind of thinking about how they can come and use this exhibition as raw material. That it's not the 'finished' story, it's a series of questions and possibilities, that open out into other questions and possibilities. That you could re-relate any number of those cases to have them talk with each other in ways that would tell longer stories, or that would contradict one another. That our past is so unruly that you can't create a master narrative without leaving out everything that matters.<sup>69</sup>

Like the archives, instead of prioritizing the informational through master narratives, the exhibit presented the visitor with clusters of objects that could be considered “raw materials,” and from which the visitor could build their own narrative or exclude a narrative entirely. In presenting clusters of objects, the exhibit did not demand that the visitor consider each object as important because it was a piece of one cohesive story; instead, it encouraged the visitor to be drawn to the objects and associated stories that captured their attention. Romesburg explains, “we were also very aware, as museum goers ourselves, that a lot of times, especially in smaller museums, you kind of wander into them, you spend a few minutes, you get drawn to the things you get drawn to and you leave.”<sup>70</sup> This sort of wandering visit is what the object-centric exhibit encourages, one where the affective pull of certain objects or the unexpected objects that capture the visitor’s attention might be the determining factor in how the exhibit comes to be experienced and understood, much like how researchers get pulled in different directions by their experiences and chance encounters in archives.

Romesburg provides a useful example of the power of encountering the unexpected during the wandering visit:

British blogger Ceri Padley reflects the affective force of the exhibition’s demonstration of belonging. Like many, she came to bear witness to Milk’s “fight for equal rights.” But she was transformed as she “wandered” through the museum. “So much pain and suffering was caused and so much bravery and togetherness rose up so everyone could be able to walk down the street with their head held high and not be treated like an outsider,” she wrote. “I began to cry. I suddenly understood the bravery so many people needed to step forward [and] be proud of who they are.” In an act of solidarity she declared her “official and long-overdue coming out” as bisexual.<sup>71</sup>

Objects that no one knew existed or objects that one was not expecting to find in the GLBT History Museum can provoke this

sense of wonder like they did for Padley. But it will not be a traditional museum that tells only a familiar, rehearsed narrative of gay and lesbian rights that will inspire this. In this context, like cabinets of curiosities, "Our Vast Queer Past" provided viewers with many objects that could inspire different visitors in different ways.

Of course, the occurrence of both wonder and resonance rely greatly on Dudley's "object-subject relationship," which is not easy to anticipate or categorize. Which objects will come to "stop the viewer in his or her tracks" and "evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged" will vary greatly depending on one's life history and involvement or commitment to the sexual communities that are represented in the GLBT History Museum. The three primary co-curators of "Our Vast Queer Past" all prioritized the affective experiences of LGBTQ visitors, and especially marginalized LGBTQ visitors, in organizing the exhibit. Amy Sueyoshi, the third primary co-curator of "Our Vast Queer Past," explains that she especially wanted queer people of colour to see that they are not alone and to feel as though they can access space in diverse political coalitions, as they have done historically in San Francisco. Because all curators wanted to solicit feelings of belonging in history and in the museum, they all recounted stories of people "recognizing themselves" in the histories displayed there.

However, the museum is visited not only by marginalized LGBTQ people, but also by the more privileged, including the majority of visitors who are heterosexual tourists. For many heterosexuals, the ability of these particular objects to "stop a viewer" in their tracks and to inspire interest in social context might be less direct. Sueyoshi tentatively hypothesizes this relationship. She says, "I think straight folks go in there to learn about LGBT people and queer folks go to the museum to see themselves in history – for visibility and validation."<sup>72</sup>

However, identity is not the only way in which people can be affected by the very diverse experiences that were represented in "Our Vast Queer Past." Perhaps some visitors went to the museum to learn and found objects that evoked unex-



pected wonder, something that resonated either with their own experiences or provoked contemplation of new ideas. As Romesburg explains, “we wanted people, *all people* who came here to find something about it that connected them to this story, this big story. We also wanted people to feel like their story was far exceeded by what was here.”<sup>73</sup> In order to do this, the curators presented visitors with a large number of objects through which connections, great or small, could be made.

Although the curators of the exhibit seem to feel an uncertainty in the number of objects they presented to visitors, the same visitors speak favourably about the objects. In many of the online reviews that praise the museum and emphasize the connection the visitors felt to queer history, the objects play a central role. Whether Harvey Milk’s kitchen table, “dildoes and vibrators,” or photographs of the Gay Men’s Chorus, objects helped to bring feelings of amazement, disbelief, or the physical manifestations of emotion, for instance, “a lump to the throat.”<sup>74</sup> The objects helped to promote wonder. Johnny H., who likened the museum to a garage sale, also writes, “point being there was material I had never thought of instead of the usual rehash of gay events that have become so famous, that they don’t quite require the illumination of fogrotten [sic] transgendered performers and the lives of people of color.”<sup>75</sup> So, in providing a multiplicity of stories through objects and encouraging the viewer to make sense of the stories, “Our Vast Queer Past” allowed visitors to be drawn in by the unexpected, the chance encounters with the further marginalized stories that they were not expecting to see.

Sueyoshi puts it bluntly. She says that the problem with having fewer objects in an exhibition is that the show can become an extremely white-centered single narrative.<sup>76</sup> She explains that it certainly is not impossible to avoid this narrative while having fewer objects, but that it is difficult. With its multitude of objects, “Our Vast Queer Past” did show a particularly diverse history and this is something that connected with many visitors on many levels.

Conn offers a warning that aligns with Sueyoshi’s own. He writes:

Museum exhibits still use objects to tell stories, but with fewer objects to tell those stories, each object must do more of the telling. What's more, fewer objects mean fewer opportunities for alternative stories to compete. When museum galleries were stuffed to the rafters with objects, they certainly conveyed a narrative, but with so many objects filling our visual field there well may have been more space for the accidental or unintentional for visitors. Even as museums have worked hard to promote differing points of view in their exhibits, serendipity has been replaced with careful curation.<sup>77</sup>

Sueyoshi has often been contacted by people who were surprised or shocked to find objects, photographs, and letters that represented people of colour, trans people, people with disabilities, people who took part in kinky sexual practices, among others. Visitors —especially marginalized ones — often felt moved by the unexpected encounters they had with LGBTQ histories in the museum. Not being primarily about white gay men, the diverse histories that were exhibited gave marginalized visitors a sense of belonging in a community that is not always welcoming.<sup>78</sup>

While the informational will always be important in museums — after all, they are promoting knowledge of queer histories — there is a lot of potential for museum objects to create a sense of wonder that might then lead to both a desire for resonance and a desire to learn histories. The example of the GLBT History Museum's "Our Vast Queer Past" is one where this combination is negotiated well. The model put forth by institutions, such as the GLBT History Museum so profoundly affected by its community-based archives, could similarly be taken up by larger-scale national museums, such as the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. Instead of using almost exclusively digital means to draw in visitors and "encourage reflection and dialogue," they might consider showcasing more objects, especially those that encourage affective response before narrative interpretation, and which, hopefully, lead to consideration and contemplation, as well as reflection and dialogue.

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## Endnotes

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- 2 "Canadian Museum for Human Rights Opening Marked by Music, Speeches and Protests," CBC News, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/canadian-museum-for-human-rights-opening-marked-by-music-speeches-and-protests-1.2771245>, <viewed 1 February 2016>.
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- 4 For examples of the digital role in interactive exhibits, see Gwyn-eira Isaac, "Technology Becomes the Object," in *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, ed. Bettina Carbonell, 2nd ed. (Chichester, UK: Blackwell, 2012), 533–45; Loic Tallon, ed., *Digital Technologies and the Museum Experience: Handheld Guides and Other Media* (Oxford: AltaMira, 2008).
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Duncan Cameron, "The Museum: A Temple or the Forum," in *Reinventing the Museum*, ed. Gail Anderson (Oxford: AltaMira, 2004), 61–73.

- 7 Steven Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).
- 8 Ibid., 46.
- 9 Ann Chinnery, "Temple or Forum? On New Museology and Education for Social Change," in *Philosophy of Education 2012*, ed. Claudia Ruitenberg (Urbana-Champaign, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2012), 272.
- 10 Sherry Turkle, *Evocative Objects: Things We Think with* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 5.
- 11 Pornography (audio visual as well as photography) is commonly collected at LGBTQ archives in North America. Sex toys (dildos, vibrators, etc.) are part of the collections at the GLBT Historical Society Archives in San Francisco, among others. A pair of women's underwear with a menstrual blood stain, as well as a vial of menstrual blood, are in the collections of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn. For discussions of archival collections in LGBTQ archives, see Don Romesburg, "Presenting the Queer Past: A Case for the GLBT History Museum," *Radical History Review* 2014, no. 120 (October 2014): 131–44; Jennifer K. Snapp-Cook, "Now on Exhibit: Bringing Out Materials from LGBTIQ Archives," in *Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users: Essays on Outreach Service Collections and Access*, ed. Ellen Greenblatt (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 146–53; Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
- 12 Steven Maynard, for example, traces the historical and archival focus on "ordinary people in everyday lives" to the emergence of social history in the 1960s and 1970s, which focused on those who had been left out of traditional political, diplomatic, and intellectual histories, including working class people, racial minorities, and women: see Steven Maynard, "'The Burning, Wilful Evidence': Lesbian/Gay History and Archival Research," *Archivaria* 1, no. 33 (1991): 196.
- 13 Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 268.
- 14 Aimee Brown, "How Queer 'Pack Rats' and Activist Archivists Saved Our History: An Overview of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Archives, 1970–2008," in *Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users*, ed. Ellen Greenblatt (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 121–35.
- 15 Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 241; Estelle B Freedman, "'The Burning of Letters Continues': Elusive Identities and the Historical Construction of Sexuality," *Journal of Women's History* 9, no. 4 (1998): 181–200; Martin Bauml Duberman, "'Writhing Bedfellows': 1826 — Two Young Men From Antebellum South Carolina's Ruling Elite Share 'Extravagant Delight,'" *Journal of Homosexuality* 6, no. 1–2 (1981):

- 85–101. Though queer archives may be similar to other community-based or activist archives in their efforts to highlight the histories of lives that might not otherwise be preserved, and in their focus on “ordinary” people, the social stigma that accompanies this identity is quite distinct. A similarity could perhaps be drawn to people who practice BDSM (bondage & discipline, domination & submission, and sadism & masochism) and, in turn, to the Chicago-based Leather Archive and Museum. On the Leather Archive and Museum, see Robert Ridinger, “Things Visible and Invisible,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 43, no. 1 (2002): 1–9.
- 16 Joan Nestle, “The Will to Remember: The Lesbian Herstory Archives of New York,” *Feminist Review*, no. 34 (1990): 87.
  - 17 Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 243.
  - 18 Ibid., 268. While this is largely due to the politics of the archival organizations, it should also be noted that most community-run LGBTQ archives rely heavily on volunteer labour and thus might not have professional archivists working with them.
  - 19 Ibid., 253.
  - 20 Snapp-Cook, “Now on Exhibit,” 148; Diana K. Wakimoto, Christine Bruce, and Helen Partridge, “Archivist as Activist: Lessons from Three Queer Community Archives in California,” *Archival Science* 13, no. 4 (March 2013): 13–4; Gerard Koskovich, “La GLBT Historical Society de San Francisco,” *Triangul'ere* 6 (2006): 48–63.
  - 21 Turkle, *Evocative Objects*, 5.
  - 22 Jacqueline Holler, “Ravished by Clio: Eruptions of Intimacy and Desire in the Archives of the Holy Office” (Canadian Historical Association Meeting, Waterloo, ON, 2012).
  - 23 For an interesting account of the less pleasant physical aspects of doing archival work, and especially the dusty parts, see: Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).
  - 24 Holler, “Ravished by Clio.”
  - 25 Joan Wallach Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 145, 148.
  - 26 Cvetkovich describes these types of environments in her work on the Lesbian Herstory Archives, which is currently housed in a Brooklyn brownstone but began in the apartment of founders Joan Nestle and Deborah Edel. Information studies scholar Danielle Cooper has also written about archives that are based in the homes of LGBTQ people: Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*; Danielle Cooper, “House Proud: An Ethnography of the BC Gay and Lesbian Archives,” *Archival Science Online First* (2015), 1–28.
  - 27 Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 241.

- 28 Turkle, *Evocative Objects*, 32.
- 29 Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, 147.
- 30 Gerard Koskovich, "Displaying the Queer Past: Purposes, Publics, and Possibilities at the GLBT History Museum," *QED* 1, no. 2 (2014): 84.
- 31 Gerard Koskovich interviewed by Tamara de Szegheo Lang, San Francisco, February 2014.
- 32 Koskovich, "Displaying the Queer Past," 65.
- 33 Don Romesburg, "Presenting the Queer Past: A Case for the GLBT History Museum," *Radical History Review* 2014, no. 120 (October 2014): 134–5.
- 34 Koskovich, "Displaying the Queer Past," 66.
- 35 Ibid., 67.
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- 38 E.G. Crichton, "LINEAGE: Matchmaking in the Archive" (College Art Association Conference, Chicago, 2010), 5.
- 39 Koskovich, "Displaying the Queer Past," 68.
- 40 Ibid.
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- 42 "GLBT History Museum Reviews," Yelp, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/glbt-history-museum-san-francisco>, <viewed July 3, 2015>.
- 43 Koskovich, Interview.
- 44 Romesburg, "Presenting the Queer Past," 139.
- 45 This article is based on my research visit to the GLBT History Museum in February 2014. This was before "Our Vast Queer Past" was replaced with "Queer Past Becomes Present," the exhibit that is currently on display at the time of publication.
- 46 Don Romesburg interviewed by Tamara de Szegheo Lang, San Francisco, February 2014.
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55 Ibid., 23.  
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57 Ibid., 361.  
58 Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?*, 26.  
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63 Dudley, *Museum Objects*, 1–4.  
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67 Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder," in *Exhibiting Cultures*, eds. Steven Lavine and Ivan Karp (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 48.  
68 Ibid.  
69 Koskovich, Interview.  
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