

Episode 32: Queer Public Cultures & the Rhetoricity of Sex Museums

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Cue music: "Behind Closed Doors" by Otis McDonald

KSV: You're listening to This Rhetorical Life, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

Karriann here, happy to be introducing today's episode, featuring Kate Siegfried and Dylan Rollo interviewing feminist and rhetoric scholar Jennifer Tyburczy. I wanted to preface by saying that this episode was produced over this summer, which is why there is a reference to the gay club shooting incident at Pulse, in Orlando, Florida. It's important to note that due to fast-paced news streams and the immediacy of social media, events such as these tend to be quickly forgotten in mainstream news and U.S. national memory more broadly, though the issues that come up in light of these events are certainly not erased, and definitely not forgotten, especially in queer and Latinx communities.

So I hope you enjoy today's episode, for its inquisitive consideration of queer politics and the rhetoricity of sex museums, but I'll let Kate and Dylan explain more about what you'll hear.

KS: Hi all, this is Kate Siegfried,

DR: and I'm Dylan Rollo,

KS: and on today's episode we'll be talking with Dr. Jennifer Tyburczy, Assistant Professor of Feminist Studies at the University of California - Santa Barbara. In addition to her work as a professor, Tyburczy is also a performance artist and a curator. She's performed in Austin, Chicago, Houston, Mexico City, and Tijuana. While working as the Director of Programming at the Leather Archives and Museum in Chicago, she curated several exhibitions that explored the intersection of race, transgender identity, disability, and sexuality, and in 2015 she curated an exhibition titled *Irreverent: A Celebration of Censorship* at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York City.

DR: Today we'll be talking about queer cultures, the rhetoricity of museum space, and what role museums play in the formation of sexual subjectivities and national sexual cultures. This interview took place earlier this spring, but as we've completed production work through the past week or two, these themes carry a pressing weight in the wake of the Orlando shooting, in which 49 queer and trans individuals, mostly Latino men, were murdered at the gay club Pulse. Gay clubs, as explicitly queer spaces, have a long and rich history within the LGBTQ community, as places of cultural expression, survival, renewal, and imagination that enable formations of political relationships and queer kinships.

KS: These queer spaces are vital -- even as marriage equality is lauded as a state sanctioned celebration of gay and lesbian love. What Tyburczy's project helps us both see and

articulate is that, rather, this contemporary moment is a struggle over sex, desire, and the public performance of queer intimacies.

Reflecting on our talk with Dr. Tyburczy in conjunction with the events in the Pulse nightclub on Latin Night, we are left considering the unexamined intersections of queerness and race, what truly counts as a queer space, and what the potentialities of explicitly queer space are for the queer community at this particular moment. Today, we'll carry these questions to a different queer space -- the museum.

DR: We sat down with Dr. Tyburczy to talk about her recently published book, *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display*. Combining ethnographic field methods with archival research and visual art and performance analysis, Tyburczy positions museums as spaces where civic and cultural struggles play out. Highlighting the rhetorical nature of museums through elements such as display and embodied movement, Tyburczy brings to the forefront how sex is managed, disciplined, and erased from museum spaces, and the repercussions of waging sex as a political tool for the silencing of marginalized voices.

Arguing that *all* museums are sex museums, Tyburczy emphasizes the necessity of recognizing museums as central sites of civic struggle over public sexual spaces, historical genealogies of aesthetics and affect, and the recognition of a wide array of sexual practices and identities. To start, we asked Jenn to tell us what brought her to the project undertaken in *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display*.

JT: So, I would say that the project was brought to me, by the fact that I was interested in doing work on sexual public culture, and as a cis-gender woman, who reads as female and feminine in most contexts, I came upon an impasse a bit in where I would actually be doing this research. As both of you may well know, female sexual spaces, even trans specific spaces, queer women's spaces, have systematically been closing. Probably one of the most upsetting closures as of late, though you being so close to New York City know that there are few and far between that nature--We are relegated to nights, right. Where sometimes even then, we are accused of taking over, and de-erotizing spaces simply through the presence of our bodies. The LEX closing in San Francisco which was a really important place for queer women loving women and the trans communities in San Francisco. And so, I started to talk to my colleagues and mentors about where I could go to do research that would combine my disciplinary talents, I have a background in English Literature, I have a background in Drama, as in staged theatre, and really wanting to harness a performance studies approach, that would combine methodologies from the humanities and social sciences; so to be in the archive, to deal in dust, to do textual studies, to do visual culture and multimodal art, at the same time that I could speak to real people, living now, working with and through these genres of material culture, just as I was in the museum space. One of my mentors told me, do you know we have a sex museum, an erotic museum, in Chicago, where I was doing my PhD at Northwestern in the department of performance studies-- they told me about the Leather Archives and Museum. So that leads to the story where I'm walking down North Greenview in Rogers Park looking for this nondescript building. At the time, the only thing that marked it as a leather space were two flags with black leather boots on them and the acronym L.A. and M. And a lot of people who live in Rogers Park or have lived in Rogers Park, or in Uptown in Chicago or in Evanston, even now they say that they had no idea we had this here. And that was intentional. They were protecting themselves from people like Peter LaBarbera, who started, it's been designated as a hate group by the

Southern Poverty Law Center, it's called Americans For The Truth About Homosexuality, and other naysayers around town and in the Illinois area. And so I come up on the staircase on the building marked L.A. and M, and Jeffery Storer, who has since become a very good friend of mine, him and Rick Storer, as well as the archivist on staff there, asked me kind of inquisitively, kind of suspiciously, asked me, "ok, who are you, what do you want are you here to see the museum?" "Yes of course, but I'm also popping by to see, to learn more about you and the culture, and I'm writing my dissertation," which for some marginalized communities is a red flag, to be studied, to be put under the lens, and what are my intentions. And so over, I would say, it continues, you know--that was 2004--for the past 11 years, I've been working with and through leather, fetish and sadomasochistic sex communities. Being vulnerable within those communities, gaining trust through doing, and not just logos, through giving my time, my care, and I dedicated the book *Sex Museums* to the Leather Archives and Sex Museums, because they were the first sexualized group, erotic group, that I did not at the time count myself as a part of that really warmly embraced me and invited me to learn all about the very rich histories and the codes and symbols that make up the Leather Archives and community and the populations they represent.

And so it was really the Leather Archives and Museum, in conjunction with my mentors, who supported me, and who opened up a world where me, in my body, could do research on explicit sex and sexuality without judgement and in a safe space. And so I do say I'm always grateful to the naysayers for reorienting me and redirecting me to what I'm doing in this project, which is, why are there lines and boundaries and parameters for the sayable when it comes to this banal, everyday, ephemeral and corporeal thing we call sex that is so much a part of the grain of what it is to be human? And the book *Sex Museums*, is my attempt to unpack why that has become what it has become and the influence of one extremely important space in terms of post-enlightenment Western knowledge production and dissemination, the space we call the museum—that so many people regard as a neutered space, as a de-eroticized space.

KS: To dig into the specificities of what *makes* all museums sex museum, we asked Jenn to talk about how particular museum elements such as the management of display, affect and emotion, aesthetic, and curatorial practices operate as a form of public pedagogy within museum spaces. Where can we locate rhetoricity in the materiality of the museum and how bodies move through and interact with that space, how does this come to bear on how we do and do not think about sex, and what repercussions does this have on the formation of sexual sociality between bodies, objects, and public space?

JT: So maybe I'll start with a case study from Chapter One, where I unpack this little concept called *display choreography*. As a kind of script that was born at the same time that theater audiences were being enculturated into bourgeois modes of spectatorship: chin scratching, polite applause at the end. And then the stillness and the coercion to be quiet, to sit still, which was not always the case in the 19th century, particularly in Melodrama theatres where there was sex happening in the audience, there was cruising, what we would call cruising today happening in the audience, there was ruckus, they responded, there was more of a call and response, if you will. And then the institution of particular modes of sensual interaction in museums that prioritized visibility over, for example, tactility. I don't go too much into the *Wunderkammer*, the wonder room, or the cabinets of curiosity, but the distant cousins to the museums, of course when they were under the provenance of elite white men mostly, you could touch everything. It was only

when museums as a democratic, quote-unquote, project where the objects from the princely dynastic realms became the property of “the masses,” and the Louvre in Paris was the first example of that: when we couldn't touch, when we started to remove touch as a sensual mode for learning and for interpreting objects in the museum. And that was a total classist argument, right, that the *rabble*, will come in and put their dirty hands on these precious objects, right.

So, that's one side of it, of what we have lost when the museum becomes instantiated as a space in the post Enlightenment world. But display choreography refers to that in all of these codified, coerced movements.

Another example that I might want to talk about is Chapter Three: “Warning Signs.” And you know, these kind of inconsequential, treated as inconsequential, parts of the decoration that are not on display, but that always mark something as distinct from the rest of what is being displayed in a museum or gallery. So I write a lot about these signs, I love to collect warning signs, so if anyone out there has any warning signs, send them to Jenn Tyburczy because I continue my collection! Because they're so interesting, the way they're worded, what they mark, where they're placed, and how they condition. They not only reflect anxieties, they shape anxieties. I wouldn't say determine, but sometimes, within that context determine, but certainly shape our relationship to that which lies beyond the sign labeled “warning” or “explicit.” And a really important figure in that chapter is the idea of the Child, with a capital C. The symbolic ideal of the Victorian nonsexual child, who is usually gendered female, who is usually raced white, and who was always assumed to be, not heterosexual, but on the path to being heterosexual. And my practical response to that is what about the queer child, what about the child of color, what about the Palestinian child? And what does it do to certain subjectivities that actually feel nourished and soul fed by finally being able to see bodies, issues, and experiences that reflect their lives. And this constant assumption of who we need to protect, and I do make a little fun argument in there, as well, that we're really not talk about children; we're really talking about a very specific concept of white heterosexual masculinity. And the assumption that this subject or this type of masculinity is so fragile that it can be shattered, and traumatized, by the mere insinuation that an artist might make that might include that viewer into a homoerotic gaze.

DR: With white, heterosexual masculinity as the subject of protection by traditional museums, and with the neglect of marginalized subjectivities in the space of the museum, we asked Tyburczy how her concept of queer curatorship might help to constructively disrupt this normativity, and what a queer approach to museum curatorship might look like.

Here, Tyburczy highlights what it means to contend with ethically fraught objects as a method and enactment of queer curatorship, which in this section, takes the form of objects with historical ties to both gay leather and kink culture and antebellum slavery. As Jenn will recount, contending with these histories led to her curation of an exhibit at the Leather Archives and Museums, in which, as she states in her book, she included objects of different historical time periods “in order to recognize the original use of the objects as a tool of discipline, empire, and nonconsensual torture and the later adaptation of the object as an instrument for enacting an erotics of pleasure and pain” (187). By demonstrating that histories of discipline and eroticism are not mutually exclusive, this enactment of queer curatorship forces us to contend with fears and

anxieties regarding sex and race as well as racism and the politics of belonging in the leather community.

And, as contextualized by Tyburczy in her book, this praxis builds on critiques from queer theorists such as Jack Halberstam, Heather Love, and José Esteban Muñoz who argue that contending with these fraught histories helps us move beyond simplistic, celebratory accounts of the queer past “in order to create a queer future more in line with ever-diversifying queer constituencies” (179).

JT: I like to say it's worldmaking on a small scale because they've always been humble exhibitions, they've been temporal, and they're highly contextual. But as a whole, the theory has two facets. One is to expose and illuminate the heteronormativity of all museums, even sex museums. And the other is to cope with ethically fraught objects from queer cultures, and so in the last chapter of the book, which is titled “Queer Curatorship,” I'm using and inspired by Isaac Julien's eight-minute short film *The Attendant* where a white leather man walks up the steps of the Wilberforce House in England. We see in the context of that film paintings of slave ships being morphed into erotic scenes, and a kind of switch of sexuality between the guard, the attendant who is a black man, and the visitor the white leather man, who take turns whipping each other. And I was really inspired by that to think about the intersecting genealogies and histories of eroticism and discipline, and the ways in which leather culture appropriates and reconfigures scenes of nonconsensual pain and torture for erotic purposes.

And so, this really grounded the theory and the idea from the film for me when we found within the museum, the Leather Archives and Museum, a leather sword sheath whip that had previously been displayed just as any other toy. One of the volunteers there who was a tremendous mentor to me, Chuck M, who sadly passed away this year, he was a volunteer at the archives when he said something is interesting about this one. This one looks particularly old, has a particular aura to it that just--incites me to ask the leadership of the museum to investigate this. So we sent it away for its provenance to be tracked. The experts came back to say that it was probably most likely used as an instrument of nonconsensual torture on an antebellum Louisiana plantation. I was working as the director of programming at the time, so I was obligated to attend the board meetings that happened every two years. People came from all over the country. And this leather sword sheath whip was on the itinerary. And it was very ceremoniously brought in, and without saying much of anything, just saying pass it around and tell me what you think about it. And so everyone around the table kind of felt like, “we were being set up.” And I could see the performances of disgust and distance being performed, and then she relayed what we had found out through the provenance, and the board overwhelming at the time, said “we need to get this out of here, we need to get it to off-site storage. Because we are a marginalized population, a subculture within the gay community,” I mean, not all gay folks...we've been attacked. Many of you may know that during the plague years, what Sarah Schulman calls the plague years, leather communities were inordinately linked for the dissemination of the virus, fisting, and other leather practices, Dungeons were blamed and shut down. But after the board meeting, I was talking to Chuck M and Jeffery Storer and I said I actually think this is a great opportunity. We're always talking about how our strengths are in the white leather community post World War II—and that's great, but we need to look to the future, to the next generation, and we need to invite and start hailing other audiences, and I think one way to do that is to go there and have these hard conversations about the intersecting

and diverging histories of discipline and eroticism, but also about racism within the leather community. And so we built a small exhibit, that became a series called *Debates in Leather*. They like to call me the can of worm opener. And I tried to frame that, with the looping of the film in the media lounge—Isaac Julian’s *The Attendant*—a conversation about how we need to remember where these practices come from, and to update Safe, sane and consensual to safer, saner, and really think about what does consent mean in certain scenes, like slavery scenes or plantation scenes, to the table. We have more volunteers of color now, we’ve done more with race, collections have come in, and that’s one way, in that sense I was interrupting a marginalized community even within the gay community as a way to enact queer curatorship. So this book is not about straight versus gay; this is not about hetero versus homo. This is about the normativities that can crop up even within the most radical groups within queer cultures, and we always need to remain vigilant of that.

Another example would be the exhibition that I put on at the Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art last year, and queer curatorship there took another tact. And so I wanted to redisplay artworks within the context of an art museum, but I wanted to transgress normative museum genres. You know we often have siloed experiences, and academia is such a great example of the disciplinary silos we can often get in, and how important interdisciplinary work is. Well, I wanted to bring my interested in interdisciplinarity, vis a vis queer curatorship, to the space of the Leslie Lohman, and so, rather than just redisplay these works that had been censored, I spent a lot of time writing the texts and getting the stories that largely only exist only in the memories of the artists who had been censored, to capture an archive of censorship, of situations that typically happen very hush-hush: gossip, innuendo, not necessarily “fact” quote unquote information. So I see that as a queer curatorial, valuing hearsay, as important historical knowledge, that memory and history are very, need to be relayed. And history, really is just the memory of those who won, right. So what would a history from below look like? And then also inviting people to move in and out of different registers, right, so they could read the text and get the story, but also alongside a lot of displays, we had videos that people could listen to of protest, both for and against the display of these artworks. And then I intermixed ephemera borrowed from the Leather Archives and Museum, my own collection, a VHS cassette tape of Marlon Riggs *Tongues Untied* that was on censored in PBS in the 90’s. And masks, and other protest materials, from some of the activists who pushed back against the National Portrait Gallery in 2010 when David Wojnarowicz’s *A Fire in my Belly* was censored there.

KS: At this very particular moment in the struggle for queer liberation, widespread acknowledgement of last year’s Supreme Court ruling in favor of gay marriage continues to be celebrated as an all-encompassing win for queer people across the country. Yet, 49 people, mostly queer and trans people of color, were recently murdered at a gay club in Orlando. And in the aftermath of the shooting, the machinery of state violence and the gay community is becoming more intimately entangled through calls for increased security at LGBTQ events like Pride, despite the reality that an increased police presence renders the space *dangerous* for queer and trans people of color and those who are undocumented. In light of all of this, we wanted to consider what role a praxis of “queer curatorship” could play within this intricate context, and how it might be used to resist the violence of homonormativity.

- JT: Homonormativity has had two kind of strains of theoretical emphasis, one of which has been the instantiation of neoliberal prerogatives and priorities into institutions and everyday life, and gay and lesbian formations in particular—and I say gay and lesbian for a reason. And the development of a prescriptive set of social codes that define what it means to be a cosmopolitan queer. And I think that, some people would say the movement has been hijacked, and I don't disagree with those folks who make those arguments, but I don't want to be so fatalistic about it. I do think we can -- There is always time and space to rethink and remobilize along different lines and priorities. But I do think there's been a big retreat, within the mainstream gay and lesbian organizational, political emphasis that has retreated into the privilege of privacy, privatization, the private sphere, all of these made up things. And the kind of classic example is the Lawrence and Garner v. Texas, right. And the ways in which that solidified a kind of emphasis on sexual rights as long as they happen within the confines of “home.” And the way those rulings came down, the language judges used to make those rulings. You know we even see it with the recent overturning of DOMA and the marriage cases that happened last year. I think one justice said something to the effect that, we do not want to banish these people—meaning gays and lesbians, queers, whatever—to lives of loneliness and despair, and that it is good for the children, that their parents be recognized as respectable citizens. I'm not against marriage. I'm against all of the money, time, efforts, and the ways in which certain organizations have supported politicians whose interests only apply to a very specific raced and classed echelon of the gay and lesbian community.
- DR: To shift back into the museum space, we asked Jenn if she could expand a bit more on her statement -- one of the primary points of attention in her book -- that *all* museums are sex museums? How might we identify the sex in the supposedly sexless -- or the queerness in the supposedly straight, traditional museum exhibits? To answer this, she tells us the story of a particular instance of queering the tour of the museum.
- JT: This journalist wrote to me and she said, “I heard about your book, I'd like to take a walk with you through the art museum, I want you to prove it to me, that all museums are sex museums.” So as I'm walking through with her, there happened to be a fabulous art exhibition about Latin American photography. There was this one series of photographs about migrant workers, laying down in the back of a pickup truck, who were either hiding, sleeping, but their bodies were close and pressed together. And so I had just got done teaching some Nayan Shah about the history of sodomy laws in the country and the ways the Lawrence and Garner v. Texas, but really Lawrence v. Texas, I'll go back to that name because that's what really covered it, was the emphasis on gay sexuality as the reason du jour of the reason why, who was being discriminated against. Well, Nayan Shah's work clearly shows that antisodomy laws were really enacted to prevent homosociality and conviviality between migrant men of color. And so I'm saying the word “sodomy” I'm saying “queer,” and this museum group, all heads turn at once away from their tour group, and they start listening to me and kind of following me around, right. And so this completely different history that was unexpected to them, to the person that was interviewing me, and to this random tour group, but they wanted to know, right? So there are all of these different histories that we can tell about these objects when we look through the lens of queer curatorship, when we look through the lens of all museums are sex museums.

One person I've found really inspiring is the artist Andrea Fraser. She has this series of museum performances, one in which she puts on the headphones for the audio tour, and

does interpretive dances of the audio guides, and so the texture of the paintbrush on the canvas, and so she's lifting her skirt and embracing the pole and what does that do in that space? And that's also why I loved sex museums so much, they allow for lovers, I mean museums are such cruisy places, so much sex goes on in those bathrooms, sometimes in the galleries themselves, and people went to sex museums to get turned on. But that's what people do quite often in any museum. But it was interesting to see what was the line, in those museums. So for example in the World Erotic Art Museum one day, a woman decided to undress and she wanted to go about the exhibits naked. Well, that was the line [laughs] that was the line itself. But to see where and in what ways we can rethink the tour. That's why I loved the now defunct Mexico City Museum El Museo del Sexo so much. Tacho Padilla, the curator there, wanted the tour guides to play on the logic of strip poker. So as they were going around, learning the new pedagogy and the new sexual vocabulary of 21st century queer sexuality, the tour guides would ask them questions and if they got them wrong, which of course there would be some wrong answers, they had to take off an article of clothing... [Laughs]... To keep the sex in the sex museum. Also everything in that exhibition was open to touch, and he told me with a glimmer in his eye, he was quite happy about it actually, that a lot of the sex toys mysteriously disappeared sometimes. So people would steal them and take them - he loved that. So, that really kind of got me thinking about wow how could we approach these display choreographies in a more sensual way that's playful, that's exciting, and that breaks with the normative ways in which we are coerced to inter animate and interact with the space we call a museum.

KS: Tyburczy then discussed the failure of sex museums, and how their closure highlights both where people's anxieties lie, and what scapegoats are used to adjudicate the failure of both the museum as a business, and the failure of highlighting sex as a political and intellectual way to explore the human experience. For instance, Tyburczy told us one narrative of a sex museum in Copenhagen, where in the wake of its closure, some of the leaders constructed islamophobic narratives, scapegoating the Arab and Muslim diaspora in Scandinavia as being so powerfully "sex negative," that it resulted in the closure of the museum. Reactions such as these underscore how reluctant we are to confront queer sexuality, instead turning to pre-existing narratives of violence, attempting to turn one marginalized population against another.

In the face of these challenges, we leave you with Tyburczy's thoughts on how a museum can foster a queer praxis and resistance that enables us to create, nurture, and protect queer space.

JT: I think that doing, making public intellectual work, public history, public art and praxis, that meeting ground of all the amazing successes that queer theory and queer studies, I mean the fight is not over for legitimacy, but we have obtained a certain level of legitimacy in the academy, but our work is needed elsewhere, as well. And how can we make that work accessible, not necessarily by giving up the words we have found that help us to define our histories, our oppression, our future. So I'm not talking about getting rid of specialized language that some people call jargon. But I'm talking about other modes of sharing that research with wider audiences. And I find art, performance, and particularly for this project, the museum as such a potent, potential space to do that work. And it's a space that students in high school visit, it's a space that our seniors, our elders, volunteer in. It's a great platform, outside the academy, where the academy can collaborate but also be humble and learn more sets of knowledges from those museum publics. So I think it's an important time, now more than ever we need a queer praxis, to

push against the priority of privacy and privatization as priority number one within the mainstream gay and lesbian movement. We still need to make noise, we still need to disrupt in ways where we can write love letters to our naysayers, but when necessary resort to direct action.

Cue music: "Other Way" by Otis McDonald

DR: Thanks to Dr Jennifer Tyburczy for taking the time to speak with us, and thank you all for listening.

KSV: Co-executive producers for This Rhetorical Life are Karriann Soto and Ben Keubrich, with additional production from Kate Siegfried and Dylan Rollo.