

# Out of the Closet: Queer Temporal Speculative Practices in Fashion Curation

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## ABSTRACT

*Out of the Closet and Into the Street* was an exhibition by Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) Fashion Curation and Exhibition students in collaboration with the Fashion Research Collection (FRC), an archive of garments and fashion related artifacts in TMU's School of Fashion. The curatorial vision examined gaps in queer representation in the FRC, symptomatic of the historic lack of consideration of sexuality and gender identities in museum studies. The project was guided by one overarching question: how can queer curation and exhibition practices address gaps in 2SLGBTQIA+ history and representation in fashion collections?

This question was explored by assembling anachronistic, non-linear connections and narratives between archival items and queer personas, histories, and signifiers. Confronting the lack of explicitly queer artefacts in the archive, the curators employed speculative fabulation and queer temporalities as methodological and theoretical frameworks to challenge heteronormative museology. Through this lens, the exhibition enacted queer ways of knowing as a material force to critique and reimagine archival systems, creating a template for a queer speculative curatorial practice. *Out of the Closet and Into the Street* disrupted traditional modes of collection and display, demonstrating how queer futures can emerge through innovative, decolonial, and non-linear curatorial strategies.

**Keywords:** queer, fashion, curation, archive, museology, speculative fabulation, queer temporality.

## INTRODUCTION

*Out of the Closet and Into the Street* was an exhibition involving a collaboration between Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) Fashion Curation and Exhibition students and the Fashion Research Collection (FRC), an archive of garments and fashion related artifacts in TMU's School of Fashion. The curatorial team comprised Deanna Armenti, Lilly Compeau-Schomberg, Michelle James, Taylor King, Leo Munck, Korina Ntagkinis, Gabby Rogozynski, and Stephen Severn, who were directed by the course professors Dr. Alison Matthews David and Eve Townsend, Director of

the FRC.

Through conversation with Townsend (2024), the curatorial team identified an opportunity to explore the gaps in queer representation in the fashion archive. The FRC, which contains over 3500 garments, accessories, and object dating from 1815 to 2000s, supports TMU School of Fashion's principles of inclusivity, decolonization, and sustainability through its mandate to expand the collection to represent the "perspectives and histories of diverse groups" (Fashion Research Collection, no date). The curatorial team questioned how they might design and curate a queer-centred exhibition given the lack of queer artefacts in the collection. Accordingly, the curatorial vision for *Out of the Closet and Into the Street* was guided by one overarching research question: how can queer curation and exhibition practices address gaps in 2SLGBTQIA+ history and representation in the fashion archive?

Although the FRC is taking important steps towards a more diverse collection, this exhibition endeavoured to see what could be done in the meantime to rectify the historic lack of consideration of sexuality and gender identities in museum studies (Cole, 2017, p. 10). Despite an increase in queer themed exhibitions in recent years, Jonathan Katz and Anne Söll (2018, p. 3), in their editorial statement for "Queer Curating", highlight that sexuality themed exhibition only started as recently as the 1980s with less than 50 worldwide examples at the time of their publication. Furthermore, the authors connect socio-political advances in 2SLGBTQIA+ rights to the increase in queer exhibitions in those locations (Katz and Söll, 2018, p. 3). The historic lack of representation and the current threats to queer rights and freedoms instilled the curators of *Out of the Closet and Into the Street* with an immediate need to challenge heteronormativity in the collection, curation, and exhibition of fashion artefacts.

To confront heteronormative museology, the exhibition reimagined items in the archive as queer while also queering the way archives and garments are exhibited. This paper describes how a methodology based on speculative fabulation, and a theoretical framework rooted in queer temporalities combined to queer the relationships between FRC archival artefacts and exhibition attendees in *Out of the Closet and Into the Street*. Moreover, the exhibition not only queers, but also demonstrates a decolonial strategy to decentre Western models of display, material culture history, and knowledge production. Despite the lack of queer representation in the Fashion Research Collection, knowledge was generated through new connections and queer ways of knowing, being, curation, and exhibition. This involved unlearning traditional modes of museology by speculating on alternative pasts, centring present voices, and fashioning new queer futures.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature that engages queer practice and queering as a methodology frequently attempt definition of the term and verb to situate the work within critical theory. This paper will do so through Chris Green and Dominic Bilton's introduction to "Queer(ing) Art, Curation, and Collaboration", a special issue of *Art & the Public Sphere* (2023, pp. 125-139). Green and Bilton describe, via Sara Ahmed, how the reclamation of the slur has, for some, become a source of power that speaks to the history of 2SLGBTQIA+ histories and liberation (2023, p. 126). The authors introduce queer theory—a branch of critical theory that emerged in the 1990s—using seminal theorists: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose ideas support more fluid interpretations of gender and sexuality while challenging binary constructions of identity and actions; Nikki Sullivan, whose writing positions queer theory as an antagonism that pushes back on institutions (academic institutions included); and Jack Halperin, who asserts that queer resists definition (2023, p. 126). Green and Bilton highlight the challenges in defining a theory that inherently opposes definition before describing the term 'queering' as "an active process in which a queer reading is given to (something)" and in which things are "reconsidered from a queer perspective" (2023, p. 127). *Out of the Closet and Into the Street* and this paper are situated within these established discourses on queer theory. The exhibition employed queer theory through fluid interpretations of events and artefacts as a challenge to heteronormative historiographies, and as a method of queering how archival pieces are defined.

Paul Soulellis describes his approach to queering an archive in "At Home in the Archive," featured in *Queering the Collection: a publication resulting from the exhibition and event program of the same name that investigated queer contemporary curation in relation to archives, libraries, and collections, and in collaboration with GenderFail and the International Centre of Photography Libraries* (2018, pp. 6-13). Soulellis reflects on the research he conducted during a three-week residency at the Internet Archive searching for items to increase queer representation in the digital archive while also challenging archives and institutions' perpetuation of oppressive structures (2018, p. 10). Soulellis asserts that "archives will not queer themselves," and identifies artists, archivists, and publishers as the operatives in queering collections (2018, p. 10). He identifies a list of questions that are imperative in queering archives, in activating disregarded or erased artefacts: "What is this content's relation to power? Who has been excluded? Who else should be included here in order to better understand the material at hand?" (2018, p. 10). Although his methods provide a template for engaging overlooked queer materials, they do not describe a process for working with collections that are lacking queer artefacts. Despite this, Soulellis asserts that the work of queering archives has the power to reshape history and expand representation (2018, p. 10).

To queer is to push back on institutions. Sullivan's insistence that queering is

antagonistic (Green and Bilton, 2023, p. 126) is echoed by Katz and Söll and their account of queering as a “challenge to the museum as a normalizing, meaning-making entity” (2018, p. 2). They highlight how traditional museum practices reproduce hegemonic structures and, in so doing, perpetuate heteronormativity (2018, p. 2). Many leading figures in museum studies, fashion research, and curation employ methods that recentre marginalized communities as decolonial and activist practice. In “Non-Western Models of Museums and Curation in Cross-cultural Perspective”, Christina Kreps outlines a critical and comparative approach to museum studies that attempts to “‘liberate’ culture—its collection, interpretation, representation, and preservation—from the management regimes of Eurocentric museology” (2006, p. 459). Kreps’ concepts decentre traditional models, instead privileging alternative museum practices and curatorial methods that emerge from marginalized cultures. Erica de Greef, who similarly engages alternative museum practices, employs a decolonial strategy; in “Curating Fashion as Decolonial Practice: Ndwane’s Mblasele and a Politics of Remembering”, she describes how interventions by “outsider narratives” disrupt postcolonial museological systems (2020, pp. 914-5). De Greef explains how the recontextualization of a garment included in her curation of the 2019 exhibition *21 Years: Making Histories with South African Fashion Week* demonstrates her decolonial methods that foreground diversity, participation, and inclusion. Queer feminist curator Claire Mead enacts similar concepts and methods as Kreps and de Greef through what she describes as queer curatorial activism. In “Curating Queerness as an Activist Practice”, Mead explores the connected histories of 2SLGBTQIA+ activism and queer curation and exhibition, asserting that queer curatorial activism changes systems and institutions from the inside (2017, para. 6). Mead’s writing engages Kreps’ critical and comparative framework and de Greef’s decolonial interventions while also positioning queer curation as “a way of reclaiming present and future queer legacies” (2017, para. 5). These researchers, thinkers, curators, and activists employ methods that challenge traditional systems in institutions, archives, discourses, and exhibitions, disrupting the ways the past is present/ed, while offering openings to alternative futures.

Queering collections, exhibitions, and curation also involves challenging ways of knowing. In their book *Queering the Museum*, Nikki Sullivan and Craig Middleton interrogate interpretation practices that result in labelling and categorization (2019, pp. 11, 65). Their work questions the idea that objects have an inherent meaning, instead opting for a pluralist and inclusive view where things can have multiple ontologies (2019, p. 65). Sullivan and Middleton cite case studies in which artefacts operate in interconnected networks that include cultural, political, economic, and technological strands (2019, p. 73), highlighting how expanding interpretive frameworks can queer documentation and challenge the assumed neutrality of collections information (2019, p. 76). Katz and Söll affirm this tactic of queering categorization; they contend that queer curation begins with relabelling but add that it can lead to “innovative curatorial conceits, groundbreaking research, and unprecedented cultural programming and

events” (2018, p. 3). Soulellis states that those conducting the work of queering collections and curation should possess “an agenda of agitation and messy sense-making” (2018, p. 10); his statement proposes a connection between activist practice and queer interpretive frameworks *and* suggests those interpretations should be unconventional. Sullivan and Middleton, Katz and Söll, and Soulellis all view interpretation as something that can be queered. John E. Simmons confirms the power of Sullivan and Middleton’s “interconnected networks”, Katz and Söll’s “innovative curatorial conceits”, and Soulellis’ “messy sense-making” in “What is a Collection, What is a Museum”, where he proposes that through museology and museological theory, artifacts generate unforeseen knowledge due to new connections formed within these systems (2016, p. 7).

This literature review details approaches in queering collections, categorization, research, and curation through queer discourse, methods, and activism. The existing research is rich and nuanced, highlighting how there is not one right way to queer archives and presentations. The *Out of the Closet and Into the Street* exhibition engaged similar methods while also adding to current queer curatorial practice and interpretive frameworks through an innovative methodology of speculation fabulation: processes that queer through the reinterpretation of and connections formed between seemingly misaligned artefacts.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The curators of *Out of the Closet and Into the Street* began by surveying Toronto Metropolitan’s Fashion Research Collection. In the absence of queer artefacts, the team activated their own relations to certain objects and garments, including their personal, cultural, and historic connections to queer times, locations, and personas. Although this method began as a fun exercise in acquainting the team with the collection, the curators quickly realised its potential to activate Sullivan and Middleton’s ideas on expansive interpretive frameworks realised through new and exciting interconnected networks (2019, p. 73). This process involved speculating not only on the connections between artefacts and queerness, but also on what the juxtaposition of artefacts together might yield; employing Simmons’ assertion that unforeseen knowledge is generated through previously unconnected artefacts in museum systems (2016, p. 7).

The curators theoretically situated their experimental relational queer methods in Donna Haraway’s concept of speculative fabulation. Haraway describes her methodological system as “a mode of attention, a theory of history, and a practice of worlding” to explore what could be (2016, p. 230). The curators activated speculative fabulation through a “mode of attention” that implemented Sedgwick’s queer framework of fluid interpretation (Green and Bilton, 2023, p. 126); a “theory of history” that heeded Soulellis’ call to refuse traditional timelines (2018, p. 10); and a practice

of worldbuilding that took inspiration from Katz and Söll's innovative curatorial imaginings (2018, p. 3).

Sarah E. Truman's interpretation of Haraway's speculative fabulation informed much of the curatorial team's methods. Truman defines speculative fabulation as "a tool for imagining future-presents that are radically different than the world we inhabit now," describing how it operates by defamiliarizing, queering perception, and challenging ways of knowing (2018, paras. 1-2). *Out of the Closet and Into the Street* employed a critical methodological framework that reimagined the FRC and its holdings to challenge heteronormativity not only in the collection, but in archival practices. The curatorial team reinterpreted artefacts as queer by connecting them to queer historical figures and by composing historically and culturally incongruous outfits/presentations. These methods were more than simply an exercise in wishful thinking; they enacted Truman's assertion that "speculative fabulation [...] is a material force that probes, critiques, and lures future-pasts across academic disciplines"—it is neither neutral, nor inherently positive (2018, para. 5). The methods enacted by the curators of *Out of the Closet and Into the Street* challenge traditional systems of collection, interpretation, and curation in museological and academic studies, instead speculating on a radically different world, one in which non-linear disruptions of the past counter heteronormative visions of the future.

A methodological framework rooted in speculative fabulation connects well with queer theory that, as Judith Butler—one of the world's leading feminist and queer theorists—describes, has the potential to shift, morph, and react to changing landscapes:

If the term "queer" is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes, and perhaps also yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively. Such a yielding may well become necessary in order to accommodate—without domesticating—democratizing contestations that have and will redraw the contours of the movement in ways that can never be fully anticipated (1993, pp. 19-20).

Butler is describing queer theory as flexible and open to futurity. Additionally, Butler's claim that queer theory is a site of "historical reflections and futural imaginings" directly connects to Haraway's definition of speculative fabulation: "a mode of attention, a theory of history, and a practice of worlding" (Butler, 1993, pp. 19-20; Haraway, 2016, p. 230). Speculative fabulation attends to the emergence of queer futures by imagining alternate ways of being in the present. Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen similarly describe speculative practices as "a site for imagining other, possibly queerer, worlds" (2015, p. 188).

The entanglements of queer histories, alternative presents, and futural imaginings in speculative fabulation connect well with alternative theories on temporality. Truman describes how theories on queer temporality intersect with speculative methodologies:

But it's not only the content of speculative fiction that's strange, it's temporality itself. Queer temporality asks us to resist heteronormative (progress oriented, reproductive futurist, biologically ordered) time. Queer time is not linear: It gestures in various directions—orientations—that might move fast–slow or with a different tempo. Queer time unsettles dominant narratives of progress, newness, and Imperialism (2018, para. 31).

The ethos of queer temporalities aligns with queer curatorial strategies that challenge heteronormativity in archival work like Soulellis' (2018) and interpretive frameworks like Sullivan and Middleton's (2019) while enlivening activist practices like Mead's (2017) and decolonial practices like de Greef's (2020). Furthermore, exploring queer temporalities in curatorial practice through non-linear anachronistic compositions and narratives activates Sullivan and Middleton's call for "innovative curatorial conceits" via Soulellis' "messy sense-making" (Sullivan and Middleton, 2018, p. 3, Soulellis, 2018, p. 10). These messy conceits are in opposition to Green and Bilton's identification of curatorial methods that so often privilege narratives based in heteronormative definitions of marriage, children, and family (2023, p. 130). Jack Halberstam examines how queer individuals live outside of these traditional timelines (marriage, childbirth, career progression) in his exploration of queer time that highlights alternative temporal experiences shaped by queer desires and subcultures (2005). Although Truman does not credit *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), Halberstam's seminal work inspired *Out of the Closet and Into the Street's* curatorial team to explore queer time through speculative thought and innovative storytelling. This methodology of speculative fabulation rooted in queer temporalities generated Halberstam's definition of queer space as a challenge to cultural norms, or in this case, an exhibition that operates outside heteronormative curatorial frameworks.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The *Out of the Closet and Into the Street* exhibition resulted in three displays that referenced the historical figures of Anne Lister (1791-1840) and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), and the Riot Grrrl punk movement of the 1990s. The assemblage of artefacts for each theme juxtaposed anachronistic elements from different time periods. Among these items, the curators included accessories that have been historically deployed to signal queer identity, politics, and desire: carnations, buttons, and hankies. The curators employed a methodological framework of speculative fabulation rooted in

queer temporal theories to explore the project’s research question: how can queer curation and exhibition practices address gaps in 2SLGBTQIA+ history and representation in the fashion archive? Curating the anachronistic displays engaged Truman’s assertion that speculative fabulation “defamiliarizes, queers perception, and disrupts habitual ways of knowing” while “imagining future-presents that are radically different than the world we inhabit now” (2018, paras. 1-2).



**Fig. 1.** Anne Lister display artefacts and additional elements.

The exhibition challenged traditional museological practices, activating Soulellis’ call to refuse traditional timelines (2018, p. 10) while applying the ideology of queer theory as a challenge to heteronormativity (Green and Bilton, 2023, p. 128), a pattern often perpetuated in traditional museum practices (Katz and Söll, 2018, p. 2).

The Anne Lister display (Figure 1) incorporated a black silk womenswear bodice (c. 1870-1880), a Christy’s of London for Fairweather Toronto silk top hat (c. 1900-1910), a reproduction of a Joshua Horner oil painting of Anne Lister (c. 1830), and a reproduction of a Ladies Pocket Magazine fashion plate (1830). The contrasting garments in Lister’s portrait and the fashion plate (from the same year) highlight how she rejected women’s fashion of the time in favour of a more masculine style of dress. The addition of the menswear hat reinforced how Lister, frequently described as the first modern lesbian, challenged gender expression through fashion. This composition was the most temporally congruous of the three displays, however the incorporation of reprinted historic buttons and badges from the 1980s and 1990s served to further queer the assemblage.



**Fig. 2.** Oscar Wilde display artefacts and additional elements.

The display featuring Oscar Wilde (Figure 2) further stretched the queer temporal connections. It featured two outfits, one with an Oscar de la Renta black velvet jacket with white silk taffeta collar and cuffs (c. 1990s), and another with a Cecil Gee of London black men's jacket with pocket and floral lining (c. 1960s), paired with an Oscar de la Renta cream silk taffeta blouse with ruffle collar, neck ties, and ruffled cuffs (c. 1990s). The display also incorporated a studio portrait of two young men in dark coloured wool three-piece suits by E.S. Phillips (c. 1870s, in the FRC collection) and a reproduction of a photographic portrait of Oscar Wilde by Napoleon Sarony (c. 1882). This more anachronistic composition explored queerness and intersecting gender studies by displaying the Cecil Gee menswear jacket on a female form. The dress forms were complimented with green carnations at the lapels, clandestinely used in Wilde's time to signal queerness among gay men.



**Fig. 3.** Riot Grrrl display artefacts and additional elements.

The presentation referencing the Riot Grrrl punk movement (Figure 3) also incorporated two display forms: a purple checked two-piece wool flannel womenswear suit (c. 1909) and a Norma Kamali blue, gray, and rust coloured plaid pull-on jumpsuit (c. 1980s). Although not explicitly queer, the female-driven Riot Grrrl punk movement emerged as a response to the sexism in the 1990s punk scene and supported women and queer people. The curators chose these garments for their lesbian- and bisexual-signifying attributes: the colour purple, checked and plaid patterns, flannel fabric, and workwear. The display is further enhanced with photographs of female punk bands—the Punk Bunnies by Alice Bag (1978) and Bratmobile performing at The Charlotte in Leicester England by Greg Neate (1994)—and with coloured hankies, referencing the Hanky Code of the 1970s where the location and colour worn expressed varying sexual interests.

Early in the process, the curatorial team intended to strategically incorporate queer signifiers like carnations, buttons, and hankies on garments to signal queerness. In doing so, the curators discovered a harmonious connection between this method and the overall aims of the project; the way these items were traditionally used to queer dress is similar to the way the queer speculative fabulation methodology and queer temporal theoretical underpinnings of this project queered traditional museological practices. Furthermore, the efforts of the curatorial team challenged interpretive frameworks within the FRC, effectively helping the collection “come out of the closet.” To honour this occasion, the curators felt it was important to continue the metaphoric coming out of the collection and the physical coming out of the artefacts (from storage space to exhibition space) through to the exhibition attendants. Be Oakley and Emily

Dunne, who like Soulellis also contributed to *Queering the Collection* (a collaboration with GenderFail and the International Centre of Photography Libraries), highlight a possible role of exhibition attendees: “to ‘queer a collection’ is to make enclaves within the institution where other queers feel at home, even if it’s just for a moment.” (2018, p. 15). The visitors to *Out of the Closet and Into the Street* were invited to make their own green carnation using green tissue paper and tape that they could literally wear as they exited the exhibition for the street. Further engagement with the public was created through a google form link inviting visitors to answer the question How do YOU queer your closet? by uploading images (to be later displayed) of themselves sporting what they consider to be their unique queer style. This addition to the exhibition design was approved by the TMU Research Ethics Board to ensure safety and care in research involving queer communities and individuals.

The curators of *Out of the Closet and Into the Street* foregrounded care in their methods, methodology, theoretical underpinning, and practices in realizing the exhibition. They endeavoured to activate Truman’s interpretation of speculative fabulation as a method to “conjure more just futures” (2018, para. 2). The curatorial team believes that their methodology of queering collections and museological practices can and should be expanded to represent the intersectionality of queer theory and queer communities, to be further deployed to be more inclusionary of race, gender, class, circumstances, geographies, and abilities outside of Eurocentric queer fashion histories and experiences.

## **CONCLUSION**

Opening the closet doors and playing dress up with time, place, and context in fashion curation and exhibition is not new. The curators of *Out of the Closet and Into the Street* were encouraged by the fact that Diana Vreeland’s curatorial visions for The Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art similarly overlooked historical inaccuracies and privileged contemporary relevance (Steele, 2008, p14), although perhaps not to the same extent. Theorizing queer futurity is also not new and has been explored by José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, in which he examines queerness as a form of identity and resistance that builds alternative futures free from heteronormative constraint (2009). *Out of the Closet and Into the Street* endeavoured to open the closet doors to new queer ways of curating a collection in the absence of queer artefacts through a speculative process that Truman says builds responsibility for the future (2018, para. 5). Queer time is non-linear, and neither were the curatorial decisions and assemblages in this exhibition; although they looped and reordered, in messy overlapping configurations, they highlighted the importance of work conducted in queer presents in the forming of queer futures.

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