

Queering the Archive

at the Northern
Territory library

A new and vibrant exhibition opened recently in the beautiful mezzanine exhibition space at the Northern Territory Library. But what began as a simple agreement to host an exhibition led to a unique collecting project in Australia's northern capital, as **HEATHER HOLT** reports.

The exhibition *PRIDE NT: Our Queer History* was created to mark the 30th anniversary of the 1985 Stonewall Gay Pride Festival in Darwin – the first public coming together and coming out of the city's queer community. The exhibition's fascinating and extensive narrative was developed by Dr Dino Hodge, historian and co-founder of the Pride Festival. Dr Hodge worked closely with Koulla Roussos, Matthew van Roden and the Library's Northern Territory Heritage Coordinator, Dr Sam Wells, to develop the exhibition. Historic materials – including archival records, ephemera, artefacts, oral histories and newspaper reports – supported the exhibition narrative. The exhibition was enriched by seven original artworks created by local queer artists in response to the themes of the exhibition.

The evening launch drew a large crowd to the Northern Territory Library – members of the queer community, social commentators, local historians, journalists and other supporters. The receptive crowd were invited to return to NTL two weeks later and to bring with them any of their own documentary items which recorded the stories, struggles, triumphs and celebrations of the queer community and its emerging identity.

On Saturday 10 October 2015, a small but highly engaged group attended an *Antiques Roadshow*-style of event – *Queering the Archive*. They brought along a number of fascinating items, which were shared and discussed, and their potential value as archival or library collection items was emphasised. This led to a lively discussion about collecting criteria for community archives

and the importance of context and provenance. A number of interesting articles were donated to NTL and they will form the nucleus of the new Queer Collection.


Dr Sam Wells oversaw the discussions and is championing this new collection. As an academic, she is interested in the challenges of writing queer history, a subject which has been taboo until fairly recently. Dr Wells is also interested in the duality of the role of collecting institutions and explained that overturning people's understanding of what a library is for was vital for creating and collecting meaningful community archives.

‘Another lesson we learned was that collaborations with community groups are a lot of work – they need a lot of support – but it’s also deeply rewarding when new links and partnerships are formed.’

‘People already understand the role of libraries in terms of looking back,’ she explained. ‘By asking them to look ahead and consider what the historians of the future will consider valuable, we begin to build archives

that have real significance to the society we are working in. Once Northern Territory Library started working with the queer community to build the exhibition, it became obvious that the next step was to create a queer community archive at NTL.

‘Another lesson we learned was that collaborations with community groups are a lot of work – they need a lot of support – but it’s also deeply rewarding when new links and partnerships are formed. The curatorial team behind the exhibition has now applied for funding to travel the exhibition and to continue to seek contributions to the community archive in other centres around the Northern Territory.

‘Library exhibitions have always been used to expose collection items, to form links with communities and to promote the use of library items in scholarship and artistic endeavours. This exhibition enabled the curators to broadcast the message that their community had to get behind building a collection within the library of materials that had relevance to their community now, so that queer history would not be so difficult to access and write in the future. This was essential in helping record a fuller, more complete story of the Northern Territory and its diverse population.’ 

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