

Hanging by a Thread

A Critical Assessment of a Queer Intervention into the Narratives and Practices of the National Museum of Iceland

ABSTRACT

This article explores the implications and results of *A Rainbow Thread*, a queer intervention into the narratives and practices of the National Museum of Iceland organised in 2018 by a group of queer academics and activists. *A Rainbow Thread* is a narrative layer that overlays the museum's permanent exhibition. It not only adds information to the permanent exhibition but also calls into question its cis-heteronormative assumptions and the absence of overt references to queer genders and sexualities. *A Rainbow Thread* is thus more than a simple temporary exhibition; it represents a limited commitment to queer inclusion – limited because it does not integrate queer narratives into the permanent exhibition. In this way, the museum reserves a marginal place for queer themes and, by extension, LGBTQ+ people. What is needed is a broad institutional commitment to LGBTQ+ communities in Iceland. Museums need to rethink and restructure their institutional practices and governance in a way that levels the playing field between institutions and marginalised communities.

Keywords: National museums, queer museology, temporary exhibitions, Rainbow Thread, National Museum of Iceland, the queer inclusive museum

IN NOVEMBER 2018, a significant milestone was reached at the National Museum of Iceland when the exhibit titled *A Rainbow Thread* (Regnbogaþráður) formally opened to the public. A group of queer academics and activists developed this exhibit qua intervention in collaboration with the National Queer Organization (Samtökin '78). It serves as a queer guide through the museum's permanent exhibition and represents the first "queer intervention" in the conventional national narrative often presented in Icelandic museums.

In many ways, *A Rainbow Thread* represents a successful intervention that not only adds information on queer history to the museum's narrative but also calls it into question for its cis-heteronormative assumptions and the absence of any overt reference to queer genders and sexualities. However, the intervention's limited scope and marginal position within the museum places it firmly within the category of temporary exhibitions. Scholars, museum practitioners and marginalised communities have criticised how museums' reliance on temporary initiatives represents a lack of commitment and limited resource allocation to certain populations, which actively contributes to their marginalisation by establishing, for example, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability and foreign nationality as niche subjects (Levin 2020; Middleton 2017; Sneeuwloper et al. 2020).

In this article, I aim to assess *A Rainbow Thread*'s contribution to the queering of museum representations and practices at the National Museum of Iceland from a critical standpoint. As a queer historian and one of the organisers of the project, I discuss *A Rainbow Thread*'s origins, objectives, implementation and queer theoretical approach in the context of queer museology and pedagogy. The article explores the history of *A Rainbow Thread* since its inauguration in 2018 and its impact through the lens of Middleton's (2017) four tiers of commitment to queer inclusion and other work of queer scholars who advocate for a structural reworking of museum practices to ensure a long-term and profound commitment to queer participation and representation in museums today.

New ideas about museums at the National Museum of Iceland

The National Museum of Iceland was established in 1863 and has, since 1950, been located in a purpose-built museum building at Suðurgata 41 in Reykjavík. It is first and foremost an artefact museum with a permanent exhibition that was, until the turn of the 21st century, a thematically organised hodgepodge of different artefacts, where the rule of thumb was to “exhibit almost anything that could reasonably fit into the exhibition space” (Elísson 2004, 150–151). As museum practices evolved, museum professionals came to view such exhibitions as substandard, prompting the National Museum of Iceland to reshape its activities and facilities to align with new priorities in museum work. The museum was closed to visitors from 1998 to 2004 while the staff undertook extensive renovations, including a new permanent exhibition titled *The Making of a Nation: Heritage and History in Iceland*.

During the renovations, one of the significant changes the staff made to the permanent exhibition was shifting from a thematic framework to a national historical narrative framework (Leifsdóttir 2004). The exhibition aims to “encourage visitors to ask fundamental questions about the nation”, such as “[w]here do we come from, who are we, and what does it mean to be Icelandic?” (Guðmundsdóttir 2005, 8–9). The exhibition was designed to fulfil a crucial role in shaping and reshaping ideas about Icelandic national identity and to engage a broad range of people.

Margrét Hallgrímsdóttir, then director of the National Museum, stated that one of the museum’s objectives was to “make society better”, for example, by “promoting openness and empathy in a modern society that is as diverse as our history” (Helgason 2004, 4). The museum’s role was to strengthen the Icelandic national identity through the values of empathy and humanity. However, the museum did not intend to impose a specific historical interpretation on visitors, emphasising that the nation was continuously evolving and that the “definition of the country’s residents remains open” (“Hver erum við?” 2004, 11). The exhibition’s central theme revolves around the question of “what makes a nation”; however, visitors must grapple with the question themselves, as it remains unanswered (Kjartansdóttir 2005).

These ideas align with the heightened emphasis on social inclusion in international museum work during the late 20th century. Museums came to be considered meaning-making entities (Katz & Söll 2018) that “generate ideological effects by constructing and communicating a particular vision of society” (Sandell 2007, 6). They construct narratives that shape collective understandings of difference, equality and justice but often serve normalising purposes by reproducing and solidifying social norms, including “heteronormative structures and desires” (Katz & Söll 2018, 2).

Sandell (2007, 6) describes this shift towards social inclusion as museums’ “reorientation of role and purpose”, which underscores the promotion of cross-cultural understandings and respect. It is a product of factors such as the growing influence of human rights discourses, heightened interest in multiculturalism and cultural diversity as well as an increased demand for accountability, which requires publicly funded institutions to demonstrate their social value. This new role and purpose further call for new forms of museum pedagogy founded on the premise that “culture has political effects and can be either empowering or inhibiting” (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 150).

Objects are fundamental to identity formation, and cultural institutions, including museums, play a pivotal role in shaping national identities. The National Museum of Iceland’s emphasis on Icelandic national identity serves as a case in point. Museums pursue this identity-shaping role by increasing engagement with diverse community groups and organisations via various events and specialised programming (Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Figueroa 2020). The idea that museums can contribute to breaking down barriers when addressing the marginalisation of various social groups and communities (Sullivan & Middleton 2019) has also meant reevaluating traditional curatorial hierarchies and creating more collaborative approaches to museum work (Hooper-Greenhill 1992).

The updated guiding principle of the permanent exhibition at the National Museum of Iceland was, as Kjartansdóttir (2005) notices, by no means conducive to a revaluation of the museum’s social role in a diverse

society, as it is primarily focused on the Icelandic national identity. The emphasis on the nation of the museum's narrative can be traced to the founding of national museums in the 19th century, as they played a significant role in shaping the national identities of the citizens of newly fledged nation-states. However, Kjartansdóttir points out that national museums today do not present a clearly defined national self-image; instead, they can provide a platform for dialogue that may, it is hoped, lead to revaluation and continuous reconstruction. She anticipated that the National Museum of Iceland would become fertile ground for such discussions in the wake of the aforementioned renewal, regarding which she critiqued the museum shortly after its opening in 2004.

Now, 20 years after Kjartansdóttir voiced her concern, despite promises of social inclusion and minority representation, very few projects emphasising individuals or populations in marginal or subordinate positions vis-à-vis the Icelandic national majority have been curated at the National Museum of Iceland. Two notable exceptions are a temporary exhibition on women's history and another on emigration/immigration with an emphasis on emigrant/immigrant voices (Tómasdóttir 2015; Loftsdóttir 2016). At the same time, it has become widely recognised that museums' decisions to include or exclude certain topics have contributed to the marginalisation of communities of, for example, immigrants, disabled people, people of colour and LGBTQ+ people, as museums shape "normative truths, social relations, and material conditions" and construct frameworks for social understanding (Sandell 2007, 175). As Conlan (2010, 257) remarks on how museum policies, curatorial decisions and practices actively construct exclusion: "Omission from the museum does not simply mean marginalisation; it formally classifies certain lives, histories and practices as insignificant, renders them invisible, marks them as unintelligible, and, thereby, casts them into the realm of the unreal".

With its permanent exhibition focusing on Icelandic national identity, the National Museum of Iceland demonstrated who was a part of the national imaginary and who was not. Over time, it became apparent that the museum's programming decisions and exhibition practices

consistently excluded minority national, sexual and other communities from discussions on national inclusion and identity at the museum. In 2016, a group of students in a queer museology course at the University in Iceland, along with their teacher, museologist Ynda Eldborg, noticed that the permanent exhibition made no mention of queer sexualities and genders. This sparked a public debate on the role and social responsibilities of museums towards minorities, which ultimately resulted in the possibility of a queer intervention.

A Rainbow Thread: A queer intervention

Until 2018, queerness had never been represented within the National Museum in Iceland, with the exception of a small exhibition featuring photographs and texts that had been displayed on a wall next to the museum's café during the summer of 2013. During the 2016 debate on the lack of queer representation within the museum, the National Museum Director addressed the criticism by stating that the permanent exhibition was under review, with an increased focus on issues concerning marginalised populations (although, at the time of writing this article, the review process has yet to start). She also expressed hope that efforts could be made to enhance the museum's engagement with the queer community and explore opportunities for collaboration to incorporate queer narratives into the museum (Benónýsdóttir 2016). Hooper-Greenhill (1992, 215) states that "because meanings and interpretations are endlessly rewritten, we too can seize the opportunity to make our own meaning, and find our own relevance and significance". Recognising an opportunity to integrate queer histories into the museum's exhibitions, a group of active members of the National Queer Organization of Iceland,¹ including the author of this article, reached out to the museum with a proposal for a collaboration between the organisation and the museum on the organisation's 40th anniversary. It was an offer that the museum could hardly refuse after previous statements.

Initially, the group considered curating a temporary exhibition on LGBTQ+ history in a space at the National Museum known as the Arc Hall (Bogasalur), where temporary exhibitions are typically held.

Since the aforementioned temporary exhibitions on women's and emigrant/immigrant histories were housed there (Hallgrímsdóttir 2016), it was an obvious starting point for work on queer representation at the museum. However, Adair (2010), Middleton (2017) and others have criticised the temporary character of most museum endeavours to represent queer sexualities and genders. They argue that temporary exhibitions lack commitment and resources and ultimately establish minority groups as a niche subject. The Arc Hall would only entrench such a view, as it is physically and visually separated from the museum's permanent exhibition. Museum visitors must consciously decide to step outside the space that houses Iceland's traditional male-centred history and enter a peripheral space where the histories of marginalised populations are told, which emphasises and maintains their marginalisation.

For this reason, the organisers of the *Rainbow Thread* project opted not to use the Arc Hall. Instead, we chose to leverage the unique perspective provided by queer history within the context of the museum's permanent exhibition (Boyd 2008; Carter 2005; Dinshaw 1999, 2001; Dinshaw & Lochrie 2006; Doan 2013; Goldberg & Menon 2005; Kunzel 2018). We agreed that the purpose of *A Rainbow Thread* was not solely to recount the history of the queer community in Iceland, even though it indeed provided insight into queer life in earlier times. We also aimed to prompt visitors to reflect on accepted norms concerning gender and sexuality as "natural" or self-evident by demonstrating their evolution over time. Another objective was to inquire into the representation of queer sexualities and genders throughout history or their status within cultural institutions like the National Museum of Iceland, exploring the unspoken in such exhibitions and thereby encouraging critical reflection on the narratives presented.

Our idea was, therefore, not only to insert queer topics here and there but also to deconstruct power structures, identify norms and deviations, and highlight how genders and sexualities have been defined and constructed through language, inclusion and exclusion. Otherwise stated, following Steorn (2010, 120–121), our goal was "to perform queer as a cultural interpretative practice" in a museum collection by problematis-

ing “the display and narrative on how non-heteronormative sexual and erotic desire [and queer genders] has influenced the creation, interpretation, collection, and exhibition of [...] artefacts”. This queer approach also allowed us to ask critical and deconstructive questions about how the National Museum of Iceland contributes to shaping the Icelandic national imaginary and what conditions exist for inclusion in or exclusion from the national narrative.

When visiting the National Museum of Iceland, museum guests first enter a foyer where they purchase admission tickets and visit the museum shop or café. There is also a lecture hall, an exhibition space for the museum’s collection of photographs, and smaller spaces for temporary exhibitions on the same floor. The permanent exhibition, which is situated on the second and third floors of the museum, guides visitors through Iceland’s history along a chronological timeline, spanning from the settlement period (870–930) to the turn of the second millennium. The exhibition primarily consists of artefacts and numbered texts, many of which bear various symbols signifying the four distinct narrative threads that visitors can follow within the permanent exhibition. In this way, visitors can choose to focus on aspects such as livelihood and living conditions, housing and settlements, arts and crafts, or culture and language (National Museum of Iceland 2005). The exhibition has been structured in this manner to accommodate those who wish to explore the museum efficiently or who have an interest in specific aspects of Icelandic history. The museum thus offers an opportunity to add more narrative layers to the permanent exhibition, which was a key factor in the working group’s decision to develop methods to engage directly with the permanent exhibition from a queer perspective, rather than creating a separate temporary exhibition in the Arc Hall.

The result was *A Rainbow Thread*, a queer guide through the permanent exhibition of the National Museum of Iceland. It leads visitors through this comprehensive history of Iceland, guiding them to twelve distinct locations within the exhibition. The journey begins at the museum entrance, on the wall beside the ticket counter, where a text welcomes visitors and raises the question, “How does a nation come into

being?" From there, guests can choose to follow the thread in two ways: by using a printed guidebook provided at the entrance or by streaming an audio narration on their own mobile devices through the museum's wireless network. As such, *A Rainbow Thread* is accessible to most English- and Icelandic-speaking visitors, regardless of their ability to read printed text. Visitors can also choose between experiencing it in Icelandic or English (*A Rainbow Thread* 2018).

At various points highlighted by *A Rainbow Thread*, visitors encounter different stations or locations that focus on themes related to queer identities or the queer history of Iceland. At each point, they can read or listen to a text that serves the following purposes:

To provide additional information about the subject matter on display at the location. This applies, for example, to the exhibition's discussion of knowledge, education and witchcraft during the 15th and 16th centuries. *A Rainbow Thread* supplements this knowledge with information about an Icelandic medical book from the late 16th century that describes the treatment of so-called "ergi", a term with negative connotations in the Middle Ages denoting a lack of masculinity among men, including qualities such as cowardice, childlessness, beardlessness, or sex with other men. According to the text, men would be cured of "ergi" if they covered their "hidden member" (penis) with juniper berries or a mixture of vinegar, willow seeds and flowers.

To offer a queer interpretation of the objects on display at the respective station. This applies to the skeletal remains that greet museum visitors shortly after commencing their journey through the permanent exhibition. These skeletons are said to represent a man, a woman and a child. *A Rainbow Thread* reflects critically upon contemporary concepts related to gender and sexuality, raising questions about the conclusions that can be drawn from thousand-year-old skeletons regarding gender, gender characteristics and the gender identities of the people laid to rest in the permanent exhibition of the National Museum of Iceland (for a similar approach, see Juvonen in this issue).

To address the silences and absence of queer people in history. An example of this is a location specifically titled "Silence", situated at the end of

the lower floor of the permanent exhibition, which marks the transition between the 1400–1600 and 1600–1800 periods. At this station, *A Rainbow Thread* draws attention to the significant gap in sources related to queer genders and sexualities from this period, especially regarding women and individuals of genders outside the binary. When confronted with such a lack of historical sources, it is not always possible to fill in the knowledge gaps. As Hein (2010, 61) points out, museums can “help us learn to live with and appreciate discontinuity, fragmentation and ambiguity”, and addressing silences and absences can be a way of doing just that.

In these various ways, *A Rainbow Thread* also engages with topics such as laws related to sexuality and gender during the era of the Icelandic Commonwealth, queer opportunities in monasteries, homoeroticism and kissing between men in the 19th century, the formation of different sexual orientations in the 19th and 20th centuries, same-sex relationships between women around the turn of the 20th century and men during the occupation of Iceland by British and US forces in 1940–1945. The tour concludes with a consideration of the changes in LGBTQ+ issues during the 20th century.

The guiding format of *A Rainbow Thread* enabled us to utilise what we had at our disposal to approach the national history depicted in the National Museum creatively and originally. Queer historical research barely existed in Iceland before 2017. Although queer scholarship has made great strides in recent years, in 2017–2018, the available information on queer sexualities and genders in Iceland throughout history was very limited and fragmented, making it challenging to form a comprehensive picture. Additionally, the number of artefacts in Iceland directly linked to queer existence is scarce, whereas the permanent exhibition of the National Museum of Iceland is primarily an artefact exhibit.

Our queer approach and perspective provided us with an opportunity to transcend assumed knowledge gaps and the scarcity of queer artefacts that museums often use to deflect criticism about the absence of queer histories within their walls. With the aid of queer theory and queer museology, queer museum professionals and researchers have

demonstrated that it is possible to overcome these barriers (Juvonen 2020; Middleton 2020; Mills 2008; Nguyen 2020; Ryan 2014; Sullivan & Middleton 2019).

A Rainbow Thread thus employs a variety of Sedgwick's (2003) queer reading styles as identified by Juvonen (2020) in her analysis of queer guided tours. These styles include *paranoid reading*, which draws critical attention to museums' normative representation of certain artefacts (or human remains) on display, and *reparative reading*, which underscores that queerness is always present in museums; we need only look at the collections from a different perspective to reveal the queerness that is already present (see also Juvonen in this issue). One might even suggest that *A Rainbow Thread* attempts a *tentative reading*, as proposed by Juvonen, by emphasising the temporal situatedness of queerness and queer identities, which encourages visitors to "look beyond the items on display, into oneself, and to recognise unforeseen possibilities, either in relation to gender and sexuality, but also beyond them" (Juvonen 2020, 19).

One of the ways in which *A Rainbow Thread* emphasises temporal situatedness is by resisting and protesting the emergence of new grand narratives in Iceland that aim to portray the country as an LG(BTQ+) paradise. This narrative is the offspring of a similar trope which centres on Iceland as a gender equality paradise due to the country's prominent female national leaders, such as former president Vigdís Finnbogadóttir and prime minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir, extensive daycare services, parental leave, notable events like the women's strike and other factors (Pétursdóttir 2009).

The image of the Icelandic LGBTQ+ paradise developed in the 2000s, in the wake of significant legal and political strides made towards the recognition of sexual minorities in Iceland during the first decade of the 21st century, such as the passing of a unified marriage law in 2010 and the election of Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, the first openly lesbian prime minister, in 2009. These events were significant for a new grand narrative of Icelandic history built upon the trope of Iceland as a gender and LG(BTQ+) paradise and centred around its perceived "miraculous" transformation from a prejudiced society into a lesbian and gay (and

to a much lesser extent, bi/pansexual, trans and intersex) utopia. This narrative is further linked to image creation and nation branding by governments, the tourism industry and other stakeholders with vested interests in promoting a progressive image of the country (Ellenberger 2017; Vilhjálmsson 2022; Vilhjálmsson & Ellenberger 2024). At the same time, these tropes contribute to the downplaying of the difficulties that immigrant, people of colour, disabled and women and gender minorities face in Iceland today (see e.g., Sigurvinsdóttir 2024; Tietgen 2024; Þórarinsdóttir 2023).

It would have been tempting for the National Museum to go down that road, but the preparatory group decided against promoting new or old grand narratives, opting instead for Hein's (2010, 60) feminist approach, which rejects the idea of either enlarging the canon or fragmenting it "to contain heretofore rejected, incompatible, or unknown candidates". Accordingly, we considered other alternatives before settling upon examining the main theme of the permanent exhibition, "Making of a Nation", from a queer critical perspective by raising questions such as the following: Who belongs to the nation? What are the conditions for belonging? How does the exhibition reflect and shape these conditions? Thus, *A Rainbow Thread* discusses the total absence of queer sexualities and genders in the permanent exhibition, positioning this absence within more extensive and nuanced discourses than those upheld by the National Museum. These discourses involve not only prevailing discourses about Icelandic national identity and history but also the interplay between the exclusion and inclusion of sexual and gender minorities in normative narratives and society. *A Rainbow Thread* reveals how these minorities have, until recently, belonged to the group of "others", thus standing outside the national narratives and identities that museum collections are intended to create. It also questions the recent inclusion of specific groups under the LGBTQ+ umbrella into the Icelandic national imaginary. Consequently, *A Rainbow Thread* not only focuses on the diverse representations of queer genders and sexualities in over 1,200 years of Icelandic history; it also draws attention to how the normative society either includes or excludes people based on sexual

orientation, gender identity, or gender characteristics. It explores the conditions for inclusion and how institutions like museums shape these conditions.

Seven years later

A Rainbow Thread was launched on November 17, 2018, with an inaugural address by the museum's director and a guided tour led by the intervention's authors and designers. Initially, the museum actively promoted *A Rainbow Thread*. The guided tour was repeated regularly throughout the following 3–4 years, during events such as Reykjavík Pride and Museum Night. Shortly after the inauguration, the museum produced merchandise with the *A Rainbow Thread* logo and added the exhibit to its education programme for elementary and secondary schools. However, museum-led activities have dwindled over the last few years. *A Rainbow Thread* is promoted at the ticket counter, the occasional guided tour still takes place, and it remains among the selection of educational programmes for schools. However, what has *A Rainbow Thread* really accomplished during the seven years since its inauguration?

Looking at Middleton's (2017) work on queer inclusion at museums enables us to employ *A Rainbow Thread* to gauge the National Museum's commitment to the project of representing queer sexualities and genders within their walls. Middleton divides museums' commitment to queer inclusion into four tiers: 1. Queer-themed programming; 2. Temporary queer-themed exhibitions; 3. Queer narratives interpreted throughout the museum; and 4. Broad institutional commitment to the LGBTQ community (Middleton 2017, 81–84).

The National Museum of Iceland has semi-continuously offered first-tier queer-themed programming based on *A Rainbow Thread* since 2018. The intervention has not been classified as temporary and has been ongoing for seven years. Although it engages with the national narrative of the museum, it has not been fully integrated into it. As such, it falls between Tiers 2 (temporary exhibition) and 3 (queer narratives interpreted throughout the museum). However, the broad institutional

commitment of the fourth tier is significantly lacking. This involves, according to Middleton (2017, 81–84),

museum-wide support of queer inclusion, both internally and externally. This means writing queer inclusion into the values statement of the institution, recruiting queer board members, and updating the collections policy to include the conscious collection of artwork by queer artists and historical objects of queer significance.

The museum education activities organised around *A Rainbow Thread* are, in many ways, representative of the limited legacy of the intervention. The museum education programme on the National Museum's website offers both unstructured visits as well as organised guided tours and activities on various themes within the permanent exhibition, such as mediaeval history, technological innovation in the 20th century, fashion, literary history, arts and crafts as well as *A Rainbow Thread*. The descriptions of these programmes on the website indicate that most involve a museum educator who guides school groups through the permanent exhibition according to the selected theme (National Museum of Iceland n.d.-b). There are two notable exceptions: the unstructured visits mainly intended for after-school programmes and the self-guided *A Rainbow Thread*.

The *A Rainbow Thread* programme is intended for the secondary level (students aged 13–19), probably partly because of its mildly sexual content. Iceland, like other countries, has experienced instances of moral panic concerning children, education and sexuality. People have mainly demonstrated concern regarding sex education for young children, hormone therapies for trans teens and LGBT+ education at the primary and lower-secondary levels (Marteinsdóttir 2023; Stefánsson 2023; Sverrisson 2023). However, these waves of concern have mostly occurred over the last 2–3 years, while the *A Rainbow Thread* education programme has a longer history. Thus, the main reason for *A Rainbow Thread* being intended for the secondary level is probably that it requires students to read or listen to texts written for adult readers because of the museum's limited

contribution to the *A Rainbow Thread* education programme compared to its other programmes. The role of the museum educator is simply to “introduce *A Rainbow Thread*” in a few words and then leave the students to follow it using the booklet or audio guide. In other programmes, the guide leads the students through the museum and adapts the material to their ages and needs (National Museum of Iceland n.d.-a).

This lack of commitment, compared to other educational programmes, can undoubtedly be traced to the intervention’s origins: it was first and foremost a queer activist endeavour that managed to gain access to the National Museum by making it an offer it couldn’t refuse. Still, the museum provided the project with resources, such as staff and financial contributions, ensuring a pleasant and successful collaboration between the museum and the queer activists and academics involved in the project. However, the activists and academics ultimately moved on to other projects, and the only staff member seriously involved with the project left the museum for other employment. This left little knowledge or skills within the museum to continue the legacy of *A Rainbow Thread*. Without institution-wide commitment to building broader institutional capacity and expertise around queer perspectives and a clear vision concerning collaborations with marginalised populations, which would ensure the upskilling of all parties involved, the continuation of queer-themed work at the museum remains an uphill battle.

What now?

The National Museum of Iceland became a leader among Icelandic museums in combating the heteronormativity inherent in museums and museum practices in Iceland when *A Rainbow Thread* was inaugurated in 2018. In an article I wrote on *A Rainbow Thread* in the Icelandic journal *Skírnir* in 2020, I expressed hope that the project would lead to introspection and the thorough internal overhaul necessary for systemic and substantial changes in institutions whose collection policies, exhibition practices, staffing decisions and governance structures actively perpetuate the marginalisation of gender, sexual, national and other minorities.

In the five years since the article was published, there is little evi-

dence that the National Museum of Iceland intends to embark on further queer-themed exhibitions or programming. Admittedly, museums have remained underfunded in Iceland and the other Nordic countries in the last few years, where they are expected to turn to private sponsors for revenue (see e.g., Drønen 2022; Hivert 2023). In Iceland, very few private companies have the financial resources necessary to support cultural institutions. The reduction in public funding has primarily led to the elimination of municipal archives and other local organisations (Magnússon & Guðmundsson 2023; Birgisdóttir, Þórisdóttir & Ingvarsdóttir 2023). However, the national memory institutions managed by the government have not been directly threatened, as the state is required to run them by law.

The financial restrictions faced by national memory institutions raise concerns about queer inclusion within their walls. In the case of the National Museum, the resulting lack of further queer initiatives suggests that the museum is using *A Rainbow Thread* to appear LGBTQ+ inclusive, while failing to do the necessary work to maintain and expand its legacy to ensure broad institutional commitment to Icelandic queer communities. If both the Icelandic authorities, in terms of funding, and the museum administrators were to take the work of queer inclusion seriously, their next steps would involve taking a critical look at the inner structures and practices of the museum and analysing how they actively contribute to the marginalisation of sexual and gender minorities, women, immigrants and disabled people, to name a few populations, both within the museum space and in Icelandic society.

As museologists and others emphasise, it is crucial to rethink museum governance to position minority communities and marginalised individuals as partners, break down barriers between museum insiders and outsiders, and commit to “ongoing, collaborative and reflective practice” between museum staff, specialists and those represented in exhibitions and programming, which includes the upskilling of all parties involved (Janes & Sandell 2019; Kudlick & Luby 2019; Lynch 2019). As Adair (2020, 291) remarks, museums must commit material resources on a large scale “so that such relocations of thought and perspective actu-

ally become possible". A single exhibition like *A Rainbow Thread* will hardly rectify the systemic marginalisation ingrained in museum practices without serious institutional commitment to transforming specific museum practices, including curatorial authority, collection policies and decision-making processes that currently privilege heteronormative perspectives while marginalising others. In fact, were *A Rainbow Thread* to be dismantled today, there would be no trace left of its narrative or any mention of queer sexualities, queer genders or the queer perspectives it uses to engage with the national narratives perpetuated by the museum. More significantly, there would be no one working within the museum to continue the museum's queer-themed work.

The National Museum, along with other museums, needs extensive internal restructuring if it is committed to enabling individuals from sexual and gender minorities to see their stories represented within its walls. As Robins (2013) points out, it is common for museums to invite external queer individuals, especially artists, to contribute to temporary queer projects. By doing so, museums may attempt to avoid blame if the outcome of their efforts does not align with the expectations of the typical museum visitor. In these cases, visitors may direct their displeasure towards the artist, while the museum still gains recognition for taking progressive steps. However, this approach does not involve the extensive work required to truly integrate marginalised populations within the museum.

What is called for is a systemic intervention into museum practices in Iceland that not only questions the cis-heteronormative perspective from which the museum narratives are told but also queers museum practices and protocols in a way that includes sharing authority with community members. Several authors have come up with ways to rethink museum practices. For example, Rensma, Neugebauer and Lundin (2020) propose "de-practices", which question past structures and practices in a way that unsettles normativity, past suppositions, hierarchies and modes of working. De-practices also challenge "long-held institutional, racial, geo- and bio-political assumptions" (Rensma, Neugebauer & Lundin 2020 13; Van Abbemuseum 2017). Jung and Love (2017, xiii) call for "systems think-

ing in museums” as well as a comprehensive and holistic organisational theory of museums. Such a theory would revolve around “interconnectedness and interdependence – collaborative organisational structure, shared authority, and strong community engagement” – where work is “created in collaboration with the museum professionals and community partners”.

Lynch (2019, 124) notes that a few museums have attempted systemic changes in museum structures and practices to seriously engage with marginalised communities in a manner that is not merely performative but constitutes “real operational, collaborative, change-making activism”. Lynch mentions the Danish Welfare Museum and Glasgow’s Riverside Museum as examples of museums that have developed curatorial processes that integrate diverse community perspectives and expertise. This includes, for example, researching, collecting, producing exhibitions and training for not only the marginalised but also for museum staff, social workers, teachers and local authorities. These museums also constantly engage in highly reflective practices on ways to represent marginalised communities and actively involve them in day-to-day activities (Lynch 2019). What similar work would require of the National Museum of Iceland is not just accepting an offer they can’t refuse, but making a lasting commitment to the ongoing work of constant restructuring, reassessment and renewal necessary to actively include and represent underrepresented populations at the museum.

Final remarks

A Rainbow Thread is a guiding narrative through the permanent exhibition of the National Museum of Iceland that has received positive feedback from both domestic and international visitors and had an impact on how other museums integrate sexual and gender minorities into their exhibitions (see e.g., Juvonen in this issue). It has garnered praise from museum professionals and visitors alike. It is regularly recommended by travellers on travel websites and apps and has been featured in the English language magazine *Grapevine*, highlighting the increasing demand for museums to address queer genders and sexualities in their exhibitions (Gaitens 2022; FrauleinGeegs 2024; Stevinazo 2019). The creative

integration of queer histories has proven to complement existing exhibition content, providing insights into how the histories of other marginalised populations could also be addressed in permanent exhibitions.

The project emerged as a response to a critique of the narrative presented at the National Museum of Iceland. It is important to acknowledge the museum's eagerness to allow the critics great freedom within the museum space (provided that they did not interfere directly with the exhibition itself). The substantial involvement of queer individuals with expertise in queer issues played a pivotal role in challenging the marginalisation of certain groups within the museum space and bringing queer history into the permanent exhibition of the National Museum of Iceland. This approach also facilitated a critical examination of prevailing narratives about queer individuals and the Icelandic nation, diverging from merely replicating established grand narratives.

Nevertheless, *A Rainbow Thread* represents a limited commitment to queer inclusion. The thread is an additional narrative layer overlaying the museum's permanent exhibition. This means that queer narratives are interpreted throughout the museum but are never integrated into the exhibition (see also Juvonen in this issue). They remain optional and therefore marginal. The museum has made a commitment to the intervention, represented by guided tours, merchandise and inclusion in the museum education programme. However, as long as it lacks broad institutional commitment to the LGBTQ+ communities in Iceland and structural changes in institutional practice and governance that level the playing field between the institution and these communities, queer representations at the National Museum of Iceland will remain arbitrary, superficial and fragile.

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NOTES

1. In the group were Agnes Jónasdóttir, Ásta Kristín Benediktsdóttir, Hafdís Erla Hafsteinsdóttir, Íris Ellenberger, Lana Kolbrún Eddudóttir, Margrét Ása Jóhannsdóttir, Marion Lerner and Ynda Eldborg. Ingunn Jónsdóttir joined the group as a representative of the National Museum.