

# Experimental Museology, its Principles and Practices: The Creation of the LGBTI+ Memory and Training Center

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In this short paper, we bring together a description of the experience of Museology students and researchers who are part of the Experimental Museology and Image Group, linked to the postgraduate program in Museology and Heritage of the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO). In partnership with the non-governmental organization *Grupo Arco-Íris de Cidadania LGBTI+* (Rainbow Group of LGBTI+ Citizenship), they created the LGBTI+ Memory and Training Center in Rio de Janeiro. Our analysis will consider the recent history of this community-based organization as well as the concepts that guide the work in progress.

Understanding museums as a “permanent non-profit institution, in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, preserves, investigates, communicates and exposes the material and immaterial heritage of humanity and its environment for the purpose of education, study and enjoyment” (ICOM 2007), we consider the role of museums and museology to be important in safeguarding the history and memory of all segments of society, particularly those who are continuously made invisible and silenced, such as the various identity groups that form the LGBTI+ segment. Museums may work for the recognition and validation of plural histories and memories, particularly

those connected to trajectories of struggles in contexts of discrimination and violence, affirmation of rights and citizenship.

The work is founded in some guiding questions: Which aspects determine the silencing of certain social groups? How can museums and museology help to safeguard and disseminate heritage rendered invisible? In order to understand the different social factors that determine the invisibility of certain minority groups' stories, we base our reflection on the concepts of coloniality and the "decolonial turn", adding the principles of experimental museology as guidelines for the actions developed.

According to Quijano (2009) coloniality is one of the elements that integrate the pattern of global capitalist power. It is based on the imposition of a racial/ethnic classification of the world's population as the cornerstone of this pattern of power, acting directly on various plans, means and dimensions (material or subjective) of daily existence and societal levels. It is precisely in the fabric of society that power is established as a network of articulated social relations of exploitation/domination/conflicts, with the purpose of exercising control over various means of existence, among which we highlight sex, its products and species reproduction. This power, therefore, produces and reinforces a specific and transversal inequality in relation to the existential dimensions of class, gender and race (Ballestrin, 2013).

It is specifically in the dimensions of being, knowledge and power that coloniality presents itself as the hidden face of modernity. (Ballestrin, 2017)

In this sense, the "decolonial turn" created by Nelson Maldonado-Torres in 2005 represents "the movement of theoretical and practical, political and epistemological resistance to the logic of modernity/coloniality" (Ballestrin, 2013, p.105)<sup>1</sup>.

The creation of the Memory Center emerged as a counterpoint to the diagnosis by *Grupo Arco-Íris* (GAI) of the absence of consistent initiatives to safeguard the memory of the LGBTI Movement in Rio de Janeiro and the restricted circulation of information about its history. The GAI was founded on May 21, 1993, in the state capital, and it acts in defense of LGBTI+ rights on several fronts, with a focus on citizenship issues, health, combating violence and improving the quality of life for members of the LGBTI+ community in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

The Brazilian gay rights movement began in the 1960s, when there were countless struggles that claimed civil rights in Brazil and abroad. Latin America was going through a period of totalitarian government and Brazil was dealing with a civil-military dictatorship (1964-1985) that implemented censorship in several areas. It is in this scenario that the Brazilian homosexual rights movement was born. Until then, the LGBT groups gathered their members in sporadic actions,

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1. Ballestrin (2013) analyzes the production of the research program Modernity/Coloniality (created in 1998) and references Maldonado-Torres as creator of the concept.

for the purpose of discussing their specific situations living in a homophobic social system, but without organizing themselves politically.

Gay activists in the 1970s realized that they could be allies with the emerging feminist movement against sexism rooted in patriarchy. Feminism dates its emergence in the country to 1978, a time when the dictatorship was weakened and countless social movements were getting stronger, which brought out the debate in society about the rigidity of gender roles and traditional sexual conventions.

From this panorama, publications and new organized groups that promote the strengthening of the gay rights movement were created, such as the *Jornal Lampião da Esquina* (1978), a newspaper created by intellectuals, artists and activists for the homosexual public, and the *SOMOS* homosexual affirmation group based in São Paulo and, later, Rio de Janeiro, propelling the movement into the political and intellectual sphere. Other groups appear in sequence, increasing the visibility of this segment of society, seeking to influence political and social levels to achieve improvements in their living conditions and guarantees of rights.

However, with the emergence and growth of the HIV epidemic in the country beginning in 1982, and with the attribution of the disease to wealthy gays traveling to the United States and Europe, homosexual groups suffered a tremendous impact. The HIV/AIDS pandemic was marked, at the beginning, by misinformation, generating more violence and discrimination against homosexuals, resulting in a wave of homophobia by part of the society, stimulated by the sensationalist press that called HIV/AIDS the “gay plague”.

In this context, the movement resurfaced and strengthened itself for the purpose of caring for peers by alerting the community about the disease and disseminating ideas of prevention in partnership with organizations focused on combating HIV. Support groups were created to fight against AIDS, since countless homosexuals died due to the spread of the disease. In this context, the GAI was born under the name *Grupo Arco-Íris de Conscientização Homossexual* (Rainbow Group of Homosexual Awareness), aiming to work on self-esteem, combating violence and acting in the prevention of HIV/AIDS.

The relevance of the trajectory and work developed by GAI can be recognized in its direct relationship with the history of the Brazilian LGBTI+ movement, with repercussions at the international level. GAI is the founder of the Brazilian Association of Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transvestites, Transsexuals and Intersex (ABGLT) and the International Association of Gays and Lesbians in Latin America and the Caribbean (ILGALAC), having formed a partnership with the National Alliance LGBTI+. In addition, it is affiliated with the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA). The group was also part of the founding of the Gay Latin Network (a network of gay Latin men, activists for the rights of LGBT people committed to the global response to HIV), and currently occupies a seat on the executive board of this council. Currently, GAI conducts projects such as *Casa Arco-Íris de Cidadania LGBTI+* (Rainbow House of LGBTI+ Citizenship), offering legal, psychological and social care for LGBTI+ victims of

violence, and the *Escola de Divines* (Divines School), aimed at training transvestite and transsexual professionals in the fashion area.

Due to this trajectory of struggles, the initial desire of GAI members was to create a center for memory, documentation and training on the LGBTI+ Movement in Rio de Janeiro, aiming to conduct future research and consultation with various audiences. Thus was born the idea of the *Centro de Memória e Formação Arco-Íris de Cidadania LGBTI+* (Rainbow Memory and Training Center for LGBTI+ Citizenship) in Rio de Janeiro, a space for systematization, analysis and dissemination of the group's documentary collection and memory record of LGBTI+ activism.

At the beginning of 2019, as a first stage, a team of seven museology interns and researchers, a volunteer student of library science and a museologist, sought theoretical and methodological bases to understand how to deal with LGBTI+ archives and their particularities. The objects in the collection reveal the power struggles within activism and expose memories that exist in both the public and private spheres. We use the principles of Experimental Museology, a current that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, and which served as a methodological foundation, emphasizing the social side of the field. It is possible to identify other movements for the decolonization of museology and museums, such as the New Museology, which developed in the 1980s.

The team was divided into working groups with different functions, among which were the preparation of budgets for the materials needed to create the Center, spatial organization of the place where the collection was kept and mapping of the collection through interviews with activists.

The methodology of oral history interviews conducted with GAI collaborators was one of the main instruments that allowed for the recognition of the collection and its contexts in the institutional memory of GAI and the LGBTI+ movement. Activists were also asked how they would like the movement's memory to be portrayed in a museum, which was important in identifying the most appropriate approach for the future of the Memory Center.

In the next stage, actions were directed to the inventory of the collection, seeking to have more insight into the available documents. A process to identify and sanitize the collection and relocate it to more suitable packaging was also started. The information on the performed processes and the inventory records of the objects are now stored in digital media and are divided by type. Currently, 10,073 items have been inventoried and can be consulted.

The team is now preparing the draft of the museological plan of the Memory and Formation Center, which will be discussed and written with the community, based on the controlled vocabulary study and testing of catalogs, in order to meet the specificities of the collection.

From this experience we can see that the recovery and organization of LGBTI+ movement testimonies in Rio, in addition to bringing the LGBTI+ community

closer to its history, has the potential to support the struggle for human rights. In addition, safeguarding the collection gathered by the GAI for 27 years of existence and (re)existence will help in understanding the actors of the community and their empowerment, since understanding the history of the group to which they belong impacts an effective search for rights as well as a liberation from the oppression felt in their bodies, throughout life, from LGBTIphobia.

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