

# A&H Ep 3 - Travelling Queer Peoples History Show

Mon, 8/16 8:59AM • 36:24

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

queer, history, people, travelling, archives, bird, ej, artists, historians, audience, alonzo, performance, stories, museum, lives, community, space, milbank, penitentiary, dominant narratives

## SPEAKERS

Bird La Bird, Katherine Moonan, Andrea Hawkins, E-J Scott

### **Andrea Hawkins** 00:08

Welcome to this arts and heritage podcast hosted by arts and Heritage's senior curator Andrea Hawkins. In this episode, we discuss the travelling queer People's History show, with curator and creative producer ej Scott, and the performance artist bertola bird, a spoof performance art history lecture delivered in academic drag. The travelling queer People's History show reveals and explores the lives of queer people absent or erased from dominant historical narratives. We discussed the lives of queer people in form of prisons such as Milbank penitentiary, now the site of Tate Britain, and the ways their experiences were brought to life via archival research, artistic performance, and the 2017 queer British art show.

### **EJ** 00:59

So today, we're gonna have a conversation about the travelling queer People's History show, between ej Scott, curator and creative producer, and bird Bluebird performance artist. Could you talk about what travelling queer people history show is?

### **Katherine Moonan** 01:18

So I'll take that one. First of all, Andrea, Hi, it's really nice to be here on the podcast. Thank you very much for inviting me and my all around amazing history, friends, ej. So the travelling queer People's History show is a spoof performance art lecture, in which I perform in academic drag. And by that I mean that I pretend to be a historian. And through the process of creating the work, I also pretend to be a historian in the way that I conduct research. So the show uses a comedy. Hopefully, it's very funny to basically talk about queer histories of prisoners, which are not for me at all. This subject matter is deadly serious. And the the sort of focal point of the show and the beginning of it is starts from the prison that used to Milbank penitentiary that, once upon a time it was it stood on the site where take Britain is now on the show was originally created as a response to the queer British art show, which was held at Tate Britain in 2017.

**Bird** 02:55

And I first came along and saw this work and have been lucky enough to be able to be in Tate as a member of the audience, sitting on the floor, in the exact space that the prisoners existed and were held in the past. So this sort of this immersive experience of understanding that you were in the same space at a queer event. being queer Travelling through time, it was just quite extraordinary. And from there, went on to curate the next queer and now festival at Tate and West Yorkshire queer stories in in Yorkshire and so have been able to see the show, grown and be presented in different spaces to different audiences. And as the research has grown, more and more characters have been brought to light by bird that I think, increasingly have touched more and more queer people across the UK, because it's impossible not to be deeply and profoundly moved by their experiences and what bird has managed to one earth.

**EJ** 04:10

And with that in mind, as sort of want to touch on the research, that you did Byrd to uncover the lives and the histories of all of these queer people who had otherwise been written out of history that, to me seemed like seems like a mammoth task. How did you do that? Where did you start?

**Katherine Moonan** 04:36

So first of all, I started to learn as much about Melbourne penitentiary as I possibly could. And one of the routes I went down is to also learn a lot about Jeremy Bentham, because he designs the first person he built didn't actually get design but like it's all related to the history of the pan.

**Bird** 05:00

Up to Conan, all of that. But then the site was used as a holding bay for convicts before they were sent out to Australia in the early to the mid part of the 19th century. And so what I did was basically started to look in convict archives as well. And one of the really interesting things about convict history is is loads of documentation. And there's also loads of historians have done incredible work, like mapping prisoners stories and all sorts of different ways. So I started to look for anything sort of to do with queerness and transportation. And via that I was able, in a sort of rudimentary way to piece together either different archives, or the work of different historians like Eleanor Conlin, castles last night, Nolan, Tim, cause there are three historians who sort of work around transportation history, like the incredible thing about Milbank is, is that you're literally able to find the cells that the prisoners were held in. And then you can trace them all the way to either Tasmania, or Norfolk Island, which is a tiny island on the north of New Zealand, there was a lot of queer panic about the penal colonies, but then that makes it difficult for us as queer historians, because the queer history is a sort of somewhere in the middle of the hysteria about queerness. And then the reality of how, you know, same sex loving and gender variant prisoners left, how did that sort of resonate with you eg as a as a contemporary curator, or a curator working with contemporary social and societal issues? How did you get involved in working with bird? Well, the thing that strikes me about birds research is the fact that it is combined with the performativity, to create a reenacted experience, you know, a way of queer people locating themselves in the past via the documentation that she's exposed. And so this multi disciplinary approach, where she's looking at criminal records, she's looking at the social history, she's looking at issues surrounding the Empire, right, and the convicts and etc. And so it's the multi dimensional mapping of these stories coming together as one within the performance that enables I think it facilitates the audience being able to go

on that journey back. And and I think that when we look around at the queer community at large, and it's it's a complex community, there's the Oh, the GSB. Right. So there's, there's not one story that fits all. But what I think we can locate within the queer community is that we share a thirst for finding out more about the history of our communities, and how that has impacted and shaped us today, and what still resonates. And so in a way, these queer history shows play a broader social function that brings us all together that reignite a sense of community in a time that is becoming increasingly fraught within the community itself. And so I find it is a very powerful mechanism to uniting us, when we look back through this historic lens at the really horrific oppressions that these people faced. And the way that again, you use this word intersectional. The way this crosses over class, it crosses over race, it crosses over gender identity, over sexualities, right. But it's writ large in the documentation, it's literally there suddenly, you know, and it's just like, how extraordinary that we can think about these things and, and chase the way that they're still enacted in our lives today. And for me, there's something very powerful when when the history becomes heritage because you bring in the performance, and you bring in the space, you know, seeing it at Tate Britain, literally sitting in that space was was a shock to the system because actually what we were doing with the queer and now festival, was reclaiming that space, you know, attending such a large scale.

**EJ 10:00**

queer artistic festivals is actually a form of protest, in the manner of of occupation, you know, we are owning that space, when we're in there were visible where there is a community, we're engaging with the collection with throwing our own narrative over the top of the collections, we're interpreting it through our own lenses, were disrupting the hierarchy of who owns history, and who has the knowledge to talk about it simply by being there, right. And so there's something that comes together in this work by bird that brings all these different layers, and mixes them up all at once that really, for me, talks about where we're at, with queer culture today, and what our values are. And what we're interested in this is more than pride as a party. This is some really serious stuff that's going on here. And I really am quite the pride for me comes in and being proud of artists that burn for the importance of the work they're doing, and proud about the community's thirst to engage with such difficult topics, you know, and such difficult histories and then reflect on well hang on, what's going on today? Do we still have these kind of, you know, these class issues? Do we still have these issues that we need to talk about race and inherited privilege? And, you know, and this brings all those issues to the fore. It also seems that I think burgee wrote somewhere about travelling queer people, sister show around archives having the power to construct a dominant narrative. And this project has very much been a way of, as ej said, disrupting and challenging and creating space for a community's heritage that otherwise has been overlooked. And Is that why you feel it is so important to kind of create work in response to archival material? Yeah, well, I think that one of the things that happens is, cause the other thing that I'm absolutely insistent on doing is that queer working class lives are at the centre of the work. And also, the work acknowledges the history of race, Empire, racism, and homophobia, as much as possible, is sensitive to disability history, because I think the thing is with archives is that sometimes those histories that I've just spoken about getting missed out of both archives, so it's like, so often, I can be SAP I love watching history documentaries on the TV, but I love to hate them as well, because I'm sat there going like,

**Katherine Moonan 12:59**

this is, this isn't what I understand that this particular thing and and where are we in this? And if we are in it, it's not. It's not the working class quiz. And it's not the black and brown quiz. And it's often not the trans quiz either. But then also in some LGBT q plus history, I think that there's also a reproduction of those dominant narratives there as well. And that can be equally frustrating. And, you know, and ej, and I have both have been, you know, experienced queer history events. Were you thinking that this conversation sure about the past should be much more inclusive, and there's a lot more opportunities to think about class to think about Empire. And they don't, they don't

**Bird** 13:50

happen, because it's not just the reproduct. Sorry to interrupt you. But it's not just the reproduction of dominant narratives. It's the reproduction of privilege, right? And so in actual fact, what we're trying to do if there's such a thing as querying history, surely it is that we want to delve deeper than Horace Walpole, that Strawberry Hill, do you know what I mean? Like that, then in actual fact, what are the values of queer history? What's the point? You know, what, are we here to queer? And surely it's the privilege?

**Katherine Moonan** 14:23

Yeah. I mean, it's funny actually, because I was just gonna say, Becton, Lewis, I think a contemporary or just before or after, ej organised another events at the taisce earlier this year. And it was about what does a queer museum look like? And basically, it was all cutesy pop speakers, even artists or historians. And it really spoke to me, like, in a really profound way because it was about things like the theft of objects from museums and like, how you can have a queer you can't really ever queer history without sort of decolonizing the museum as well. And then sort of thinking about What does decolonizing mean? And I, I really sort of got a lot from those narratives in that event, because I, I think that queer history in the museum is an opportunity to absolutely shape the foundations of the museum and and to sort of say, What the hell is this? What is this history that we're talking about here, and who's it for and who's in the archive, and is not a news in the room, it is not an outcome, we mash all of that off of it.

**Bird** 15:41

And and I think one of the things that we have to do is, as culture producers, within museums, is understand that when you bring queer artists like yourself in bird, is that you have to be given the freedom to write your own work and your programme. You can't get a queer artists team and go, Hey, I'd like you to do a joyful piece for this section, you know, do some drag, why don't you do some drag write, in actual fact, that's getting you know that what, what you actually need to do is understand that queer writers are likely to come in and critique your institution, you know, they're likely to come into this space and go Ha ha, ha, there's things we'd like him to think about. That's what's great, right? That's, that's actually what museums should be for. They should be the sites for thinking and challenging what potentially has gone on in the past that needs to change in the future. And, and it did come up with with the one security pop museum look like with those narratives, there is no such thing as decolonizing the museum that's like saying, you can take religion out of the church. Yeah, what you need to do is be anti racist, okay, and so you can't decolonize a museum without giving back objects and lands. It's a physical act. It's not a metaphor, right. And we too easily slip into these languages of we know what the issue is today. So we're just gonna use this word really loosely, and really frequently, and never make

us look like we're doing something. Right. In actual fact, what queer artists tend to do is come in and go, yo, you're not or you're not doing it fast enough. And I'm going to write a performance about it. And too bad if your audience is here, you know, and that's, that's exactly what you do. You are nerve, the institution, bird in a really important way that is broader than only suiting a queer audience. It's for all people to benefit from, right. And so this is why queer history is an LGBT history, right? queer history is for everybody. Because it's a process. It's it's a process. It's not, it's not just a classroom, although in actual fact, the US actually was.

**Katherine Moonan 18:00**

Absolutely. And it's like, there's no separation, either. It's like, you know, I want to hear the queer history of the Industrial Revolution, for example, you know, and histories of factories, and you know, another shows about the workhouse, it's like, but it's not a separate, we are no separate thing in the corner. We are part of mainstream history. And it's for everyone.

**EJ 18:28**

The heart of it, and the processes is ages, talks about this kind of idea of process. That process is built into the project as well, because you collaborate with so many different people and different communities. And the work itself is shown in different places. So AJ, you've taken it to London and Leeds wasn't at the festival in the

**Bird 18:54**

queer stories project. Yeah, yeah.

**EJ 18:56**

So it really is about inclusivity. So everything from the kind of geographic spread and at travelling itself and going around the country, to working with different community groups and having different artists collaborators. Could you talk about that, please?

**Katherine Moonan 19:15**

Sure. Well, I think that one of the most exciting things in 2019 so before the pandemic was within the space of a couple of months, I performed the show to the lawn mowers Theatre Company in Newcastle, and they are a theatre company of adults with learning disabilities. And it was amazing, it was worth it, what a gift. And then a couple of months later, I performed it, Cambridge University, you know, for lots of professional historians and, and all of that and, and the thing guy, you know, I'm really proud of about that. Work is that exactly the same material could fit those two audiences and be really like fun and engaging and mass my dream really is to is to make work like that and carry on refining it. I write to historians a lot and say EJC helped me to sort of, you know, how to to a physical archive and things like that. It's like I had no idea about doing things like that before I started this. And so I will contact the historians and introduce myself and more often than not, they really, you know, are really excited by what I do. Then in terms of collaborators in terms of, I've been working with young Willem van Bosch, he directed the work. And he did the drama tag with me as well. And there's also artists who do voiceovers, like les Carr is a narrator. And there's audio description for vision impaired but it's not just for visually impaired audiences. enhances it for everyone. So Amelia Cavallo from quit lash

supported me on that, and sort of really helped me get my get my audio description being gone. There, let's know no way to do it.

**Bird** 21:32

I think one of the best things that I saw you do as a form of collaboration they burned as well was when you were giving the visual guide on the stage at Leeds before the show. I mean, it was just extraordinary working with the audience live, to give them access to the texture of your costume to the setup of the set on the stage and, and literally running their hands along the stage to you know, remarkable.

**Katherine Moonan** 22:04

Yeah, it was great, you know, to sort of make the show accessible and be able to sort of open up the history like that. That's really important to me. And it's something also like that. I think that access is starting to get better at queer events as well. It's like it's, we'll learn in our way. And if we don't have a particular barrier ourselves, it's like sometimes it can be, you know, an enable a swale, that's like there's a there's a set of work that even individuals or institutions need to do to move on in that regards.

**EJ** 22:42

So when you took the project on the road, and you went round the country, I mean, you you took it to 10 venues, didn't you? Something like that? Yeah,

**Bird** 22:51

yeah. And ej, you worked on this project at two of those venues? How was it received by the audience? Everyone loves it? It's it's just hands down. Like it's a rip roaring success. But I would almost prefer to answer that from my personal experience, because I had the joy of seeing it myself as a member of the audience. Before I was involved with the work that bird does. And before I was even involved with Tate, actually, it was the year before I was involved with Tate. And I was profoundly affected, you know, the fact that we were thinking about we, I guess, I guess I was so affected, because for years and years and years, we've scrambled around to be included in museums, right? we've, we've been jumping up and down on on the periphery going, no query people existed, you know, like for what feels like centuries itself, you know, and so, we then had this huge, remarkable national profile exhibition, queer British art, right. But you can only rely on the collections, you have to build an art exhibition at that level. Right. And so the fact of the matter is, it was largely collected by very wealthy, white people of the upper echelons of society, who did it according to their taste. And so a lot of this work was commissioned by them as well. They weren't commissioning things that would displace the reputation in society either. Right? And particularly when you're thinking about a collection by Tate Britain, he knows it's it's it's funny. Did in DC, right? It is of this time, it's now people quite often mistake trade take fitness as only being bad in actual fact it is British artists up until the present day. But essentially you were relying on a collection that doesn't visibly contain lots and lots of black queer people having bump sex. It's just it's, it's not there. So when we finally get our moment in the spotlight, Oh, my, it's, it's it's an exhibition with querying the title by a national institution, it's good to be noticed around the world harar. We're very, very grateful for the fact that it exists. But but the layer of queer history that biologic represents, is is a layer of queer history that doesn't belong to me. It's not my people, right? It doesn't talk to me about things that I can imagine I might have gone through if I was there back then. Right?

What talks to me and working class stories, and we so often talk about this being hidden history, I think what birds done is go, that's a really lazy excuse for not talking about working class query history. It's all there in the archive, when you're clever enough, and determined enough to take a multidisciplinary research approach, right? That actually, it's not hidden, it hasn't been researched. And so for me to think about and because, you know, I grew up in Australia. For me this the interconnectivity of the fact that it related to this colonial history that I feel so passionate about, and that affects so many people from so many different areas of the colonies who are here today, in Britain, you know, there were these layers of richness that were beyond queer histories that I had been exposed to in the past. And so it opened up a world of possibilities for me about gain. Aha, that's how you do it. You know, and it was really, it's really important piece of work because of that.

**EJ 27:19**

Can I just say, as well, I think that's so beautifully said, because, so, the performance at the Alfa Betty in New Castle, and it was an absolute privilege to watch bird perform. And

**Katherine Moonan 27:34**

I

**EJ 27:35**

am getting goosebumps now thinking about it, about what I saw and what I and how you made me feel. Because the narrative about Alonzo Johnson, who is the centre point of the travelling queer People's History show is so beautiful and full of energy and full of life and full of struggle, and

**Katherine Moonan 28:01**

fight.

**EJ 28:04**

constantly trying to make their life work for them, that it was profoundly moving. And you could connect with it in a really immediate way. Can we talk a little about Alonzo because they are such an extraordinary character.

**Katherine Moonan 28:23**

Absolutely. Thanks, Angier. And actually, Alonzo is a great way of talking about the Tate's as well, because Alonzo is held in Milbank before they were transported. And so Alonzo Johnson was a travelling performer. And that's also partly why the show has got the travelling history show in it. And so they were a homeless travelling comedian. And they were born in about 1824. And when they were 19, they were caught having queer sex in Newcastle with David Denham. For the really incredible thing about the story is is that, that in the newspapers, it said that Alonzo had been going about the town some weeks dressed in women's clothes. And it's just like, I mean, even just saying that it's just so incredible that we have this person who was gender variants of some way or another, was queer, was homeless was an artist. And basically, their first ever time they got arrested was when they were 17. And they were nicking props to use in their performances in in case Though. And so there's this sort of performativity like they also stole items of women's clothing. They sell priests robes. And Alonzo lived until they were 67. And they died in a pauper's Hospital in a van Demon's land. And they were held in

Norfolk Island was the West penal colony in the British Isles. They were on chain gangs, like, Can you imagine being a sensitive, gender variant form attack female on a chain gang? It's like, it's just, it's extraordinary. And, and it's like, I think that a Lancer story is is of national and international significance. It's also of huge significance to a New Castle, as well, because, you know, we have like this. It's, it's all like, what it's like, is it's like, finding gold. You know, I mean, it's, um, you can sift and sift and surf. But then like, these little, these little archival gems come up, where you can prove this, you know, and there's more to say about Alonzo. But that's the potted history. I feel like as well, that, at the moment, the increase in hostile environment towards transgender and non binary people in the UK, it's absolutely horrific. The cultural oppression, not only that culture fits into this, because we're talking about culture at the moment, but it's not just culture, it's, it's medical, it's, it's social, it's about putting pressure on families and young children. And I feel like when these trans potential and ancestors are in the archive, it's a way of sort of being able to connect with a really long history where trans people have been around forever and, and we can prove that even more, because we know that there were trans intersex people who were held in in millbank penitentiary. And I feel like that's why there's so much sort of fuss over so called work history is because it places sees lies in it in a much broader and longer historical context.

**EJ 32:34**

Is there anything that you want to say to one another, or to talk about this project that hasn't been raised in the conversation so far,

**Katherine Moonan 32:48**

I just want to thank you, Jay, for seeing my way, really, and giving me like having faith in it, and given me the confidence platform, that means the whales, and you know, if you've opened up incredible spaces, ej, and I didn't want to do the work virtually, because I really love being in front of live audiences. So last year, I didn't take the show anywhere, and it's been on pause. And it's like, in that pause, we've had this huge historical juncture of not only COVID, but also of Black Lives Matter, and of the statues coming down. And I just need to acknowledge that when the show goes back, it's not going to be the same as it was beforehand, because in a way, like that public fight around it history that happens is sort of like I hope that the work sort of speaks to a lot of that. And I hope that when I pick the workup again, and I start travelling again, I can there to honour and justice to some of that energy, you know, that erupted in 2020. And, you know, I feel like as a performance artist, I have a responsibility to carry that. And honour that in my way.

**Bird 34:15**

I just said you've worked so hard birdie, and it's such important work, we just need you to keep going with it. It feels to me, like the travelling people's career history show could never end. It feels to me, like there's chapter after chapter after chapter that can go into it, that it's a lifelong work, you know, and that actually, it just, it's just kind of grow and grow and grow. And the more locations and the more places you can both take it to but then delve into the archives we need there as well. You know, I just, it's going to be a massive body of work, you know, and so just keep going because from the bottom of my heart, it has affected me deeply and I know it's affected me People all over the country now. And this is about opening up voices beyond the elite queer framework, you know, and get what? That's most of us.

You know, this is about our community talking to our communities in the past. So it's just a gift and it's, it's, it's got to just keep going. I totally agree.

**EJ** 35:24

It's fabulous. Thank you so much, AJ and bird, honestly are just such wonderful people. It's been an absolute pleasure to have a chat with you over zoom, and none of our dogs Miss.

**Andrea Hawkins** 35:43

Thanks for joining us for this arts and heritage podcast. You've been listening to curator and creative producer ej Scott, and performance artist bird bird. This episode was hosted by Andrea Hawkins and produced by Tim O'Donoghue and Kiki Claxton. To hear more about arts and heritage. Sign up to our newsletter at [artsandheritage.org.uk](https://artsandheritage.org.uk). Thanks for listening