Gender nonconformity and military internment: curating the Knockaloe slides

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Abstract

This article discusses the interpretation and curation of the glass plate slides surviving from the First World War civilian internment camp at Knockaloe, Isle of Man, which show internees (all assigned male at birth) presenting as female in various situations. With reference to recent debates in heritage studies concerning the social agency of museums, and to the ways in which erasure of trans history is increasingly politically instrumentalised, it argues in favour of acknowledging the possibility that some internees' female presentation was motivated by female gendered subjectivity. The article discusses the circumstances in which people who were assigned male at birth presented as female in military contexts; considers the specific issues at stake when curating the history of marginalised groups; and analyses the multiple possible motivations for the female presentation shown in the Knockaloe slides. Consequently, it advocates a polyvocal curatorial approach, which validates the slides' trans possibility equally alongside other motivations. It concludes by arguing for a shift in the historiographical discourse of gender and military internment, including a more mindful approach to the use of gendered language.

Keywords: Internment; First World War; transgender; drag; curation

Introduction: curation and queer critical history

Among the glass plate slides which survive from Knockaloe, a First World War civilian internment camp on the Isle of Man, are a significant number which show internees – all of whom were assigned male at birth – presenting as female in a variety of situations. While many of these situations are obviously theatrical (Figure 1), others are not (Figures 2, 3). In

fact, written and photographic evidence demonstrates that some internees who presented as female on stage went on to live as female full-time within the camp.

This article discusses how objects like the Knockaloe slides should be approached in curatorial practice. I argue that in addition to communicating the various ways in which historians have hitherto interpreted the internees' female presentation – largely as simple entertainment, or as an integral part of creating a sense of home and normality within the camp, which necessarily involved the creation of 'substitute women' (Panayi 2014, 121) – it is vital that we acknowledge queerer possibilities. Specifically, it is important to take seriously the possibility that some internees embraced female presentation as an opportunity to make their gender expression congruent with their gendered sense of self: that they felt more comfortable living as female. In this article, I argue for the acknowledgement of this possibility – not alone or definitively, but as one of a number of simultaneous interpretations – from a scholarly, curatorial and political perspective. While this argument makes specific recommendations for the curatorial representation of Knockaloe internment camp, it also echoes Oliver Winchester's call for a broader 'reappraisal of museum collections' in terms of their potential queer significance, along with Rhiannon Mason's suggestion that heritage professionals 'critically examine the paradigms and discourses within which they work' (Winchester 2012, 142; Mason 2005, 205). I supplement these scholars' calls to action by arguing for a reappraisal of the gendered history of military internment in historiographical, as well as curatorial, practice.

I first discuss the context that produced the Knockaloe slides, and the circumstances in which people who were assigned male at birth presented as female in military contexts. I then consider the specific issues at stake when curating the history of marginalised groups, arguing that the emotional and political significance of this kind of heritage creates distinct demands for the curator. My subsequent analysis of the multiple possible motivations for the

female presentation shown in the Knockaloe slides leads to my advocacy of a polyvocal curatorial approach, which validates the slides' trans possibility equally alongside other motivations.

Recent developments in the historiography of queer gendered and sexual behaviour and experience – particularly following Laura Doan's proposal of 'queer critical history' – have usefully encouraged scholarship that does not map present identity categories back onto past subjects, instead recognising the ultimately unknowable and uncategorisable nature of those subjects' sexual and gendered lives (Doan 2013, viii-xii, 4; see also Sigel 2016). Yet these discussions have, I would argue, largely paid insufficient attention to two considerations essential to this article's discussion. Firstly, the issue of transgender possibilities in the past has a scholarly history and political present distinct from other forms of queerness. Secondly, the curatorial representation of the past has specific circumstances and demands which distinguish it from the academic analysis of that past.

Doan's investigation of historiographical approaches to past sexual and gender nonconformity proceeds from an 'interest in figuring out how and why' Lee Edelman's formulation of queerness as 'methodological rather than ontological' – the suggestion that queerness is best seen as a historiographical approach, rather than as a category of being to be identified in the past – 'mattered or, conversely, might not matter (depending on the purpose of the historicizing)' (Doan 2013, x). This consideration of 'purpose' is crucial to developing curatorial approaches. Queer critical approaches do not cease to 'matter' in heritage contexts: on the contrary, a refusal to assign definitive identity categories to historical subjects is central to my argument about how the multiple possible motivations of the female-presenting internees at Knockaloe should be communicated to the public. However, I am convinced that in the specific context of curation, the question of whether 'queer' is a primarily 'methodological' or 'ontological' begins to 'matter' differently.

The ‘genealogical impulses’ that Doan identifies in some historical literature have been shown to be present – whether we, as scholars, would like them to be or not – in museum visitors, particularly those from groups marginalised in contemporary society (Delin 2002, 95; Bauer 2017, 9-10; Dodd et al. 2010, 98-99). Museum representation for these groups, heritage scholars have convincingly demonstrated, carries emotional significance, and the representation of marginalised history has potential to foster a sense of community across time for socially isolated visitors (see also Dinshaw 1999, 21). A decision to eschew all reference to modern identity categories may be the most fruitful one in an academic context which does not primarily seek to engage the public, but the ethics of this decision are shifted by consideration of the desires and vulnerabilities brought by visitors to a heritage space, and of museums’ social agency and social responsibility. To refuse to acknowledge the trans possibility invoked by the Knockaloe slides is to refuse trans visitors a point of identification in a museum, and to ignore the growing consensus that ‘the narratives [museums] construct and the moral standpoints they adopt have social effects and consequences’ (Nightingale and Sandell 2012, 3; Dodd et al. 2008). It is also to abdicate this responsibility during intense debates concerning trans rights in the UK, in which the claimed historical nonexistence of trans people is frequently instrumentalised.

Beyond curation, historiographical methodology would also benefit from examining specific factors that continue to shape academic writing about past gender nonconformity. A habit of thought has developed in historiography according to which historical gender nonconformity has frequently been interpreted according to the modern categories of ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’, but infrequently according to the category of ‘trans’. ‘The passing woman or female husband [has been] seen as one means of expressing desire between women before lesbian identity was established,’ Alison Oram summarises, ‘while male effeminacy and cross-dressing [has been] subsumed within a parallel story as one strand of the historical

construction of gay male identity' (Oram 2006, 257-58). One response to this might be to advocate for the avoidance of categorisation altogether. However, while a deliberate refusal to categorise a historical subject may be intended to neutrally communicate the fact that the gendered experience of past subjects is unknowable, scholars in fact risk – owing to the weight of historiographical habit, and the pervasive cisnormativity and heteronormativity of contemporary society – unintentionally communicating that certain minority sexual and gendered experiences in the past were definitively nonexistent. Just as neutrality is itself a political stance, asserting unknowability in historiography constitutes a tacit refusal to challenge the longstanding privileging of some historiographical interpretations over others (Portelli and Eizadirad 2018, 62).

It is also important to recognise the *depth* of attention required to avoid accidentally constraining or categorising past gendered experiences. Unlike sexual behaviour, many of the mechanics of writing about gender are almost unconscious: the assignment of gender to a historical subject pervades our very grammar. Consequently, even scholars who explicitly claim to avoid categorising the people they write about can end up unthinkingly categorising them in gendered terms. Lisa Sigel, for example, states that she wants 'to capture the variety of ways that people saw impersonation, rather than privileging one set of meanings over another' – but her reference to female presentation as 'impersonation' itself constitutes privileging one meaning over another: namely, privileging the interpretation that female presentation was masquerade at odds with identity, as opposed to an expression of gendered subjectivity. Sigel's repeated reference to female-presenting prisoners of war (POWs) as 'men', and use of 'he', has a similarly non-neutral effect (2016, 99, 100, 103).

My goal in this article is to open up the multiple simultaneous motivations, and facets of the gendered subjectivity, behind the female-presenting internees shown in the Knockaloe slides – some of which have been obscured by the often unconscious mechanisms that have

categorised their gendered experience as that of men practising female impersonation. I use the phrase ‘trans possibility’ to refer to the overlooked possibility that some of these internees were motivated by a desire to live as female because this felt congruent with their internal sense of gender. My term ‘trans’ – an umbrella term describing anyone who does not always and only identify with the gender they were assigned at birth – is not a tool for fixing past subjects in a modern identity category; instead, it is a tool for illuminating possible aspects of their experiences which might (owing to the interpretive habits imposed by our own cultural moment) have otherwise remained unconsidered and underexplored, and for calling deliberate attention to the modern identities inevitably brought by visitors to a museum.

A brief explanation of the terms I have avoided, outside of quotations, is equally crucial. I refer to ‘presenting as female’ or similar, rather than to ‘cross-dressing’ or ‘transvestism’: the latter terms carry sensationalised, stigmatised connotations (Stryker 2017, 40) and are increasingly associated with gender expression which is unequivocally unconnected to gender identity, thus privileging an interpretation of female presentation as masquerade. For the same reason, I avoid the term ‘female impersonator’. To avoid presumptively fixing the internees in gendered categories, I refer to them neutrally as having been assigned male at birth (AMAB), rather than as ‘men’ or ‘women’.

Context: female presentation in internment camps

From the outbreak of the First World War, and particularly following the sinking of the Lusitania in May 1915, Britain interned AMAB nationals of enemy countries who were considered of military age. While civilians were initially interned in makeshift camps or in repurposed existing buildings such as holiday camps, the need for purpose-built facilities quickly became clear. Knockaloe camp, on the west coast of the Isle of Man, was constructed rapidly during October and November 1914 and became the largest camp in the British Isles.

At its peak it held 22,769 people, around two thirds of the total number interned in Britain. The last internees did not leave Knockaloe until October 1919, following successive appeals against Britain's attempts to deport them at the end of the war (Corkill 2013, 62, 72).

Knockaloe comprised four sub-camps, each further divided into several compounds (Corkill 2013, 63). Camp IV was a 'privilege camp', with higher-quality accommodation and a tennis court, in which wealthy internees could purchase billets. Throughout Knockaloe, however, internees lived a regimented existence with little privacy (Corkill 2013, 131-5). In attempt to stave off boredom and depression (known as 'barbedwirelitis'), internees at Knockaloe and other camps engaged in a wide variety of activities including sport, music, theatre, education, gardening, running small businesses from barbershops to potato-peeling. The comparative size of Knockaloe increased the diversity of activities available, as did the efforts of Industrial Superintendent James T. Baily to involve internees in craft production, the outputs of which were sold to raise money for the war effort (Corkill 2013, 69-71).

Knockaloe developed twenty separate theatres across its four compounds (Panayi 2014, 119). Privileged Camp IV was particularly prolific, containing 'seven independent theatres' which together produced 1532 entertainments (plays, variety shows, concerts, festivals and social evenings) between October 1915 and March 1919 (Panayi 2014, 119). On average, one show per week was performed in each compound during the period of internment: mostly comedies, including plays by German, British, Spanish, French and Danish writers (Draskau 2009, 193; Corkill 2013, 155). Roles of all genders in these productions were played by internees, while others worked as female theatre attendants or waitresses (Köhne and Lange 2014, 25; Rachamimov 2014, 116).

Owing to the lack of cisgender women, AMAB people in military contexts – civilian internment camps, POW camps, and the Western and Eastern fronts – frequently presented as

female on stage (Draskau 2009, 200; Reiss 2013, 14; Makepeace 2017a 70; Makepeace 2017b 75.)[1] In contrast to the 'mimicry' of comic or pantomime drag, female presentation in military contexts was 'mimetic', constructed with the aim that observers would read AMAB internees as cisgender women (Makepeace 2017b, 79). This effect was enhanced by the fact that some internees not only presented as female in explicitly theatrical contexts – where their gender nonconformity may well have been experienced and/or perceived as masquerade motivated by the desire to create entertainment – but, in addition, lived as female offstage. Contemporary observers describe these internees' adoption of behaviours and mannerisms coded as feminine (Cohen-Portheim 1931, 148; Rachamimov 2006, 377-78; Draskau 2009, 198), and often validate their female identities: they were given female names, and attracted fans, attendants, and messages of attraction articulated in feminine terms (Rachamimov 2006, 377-78; Draskau 2009, 198; Vetter 2014, 11).

It is this offstage female presentation – as documented in slides such as Figs. 2 and 3 – that presents both challenge and opportunity for the curation of the slides that survive from Knockaloe. The challenge for heritage practitioners is to explain the practice and represent the many motivations behind it, and to identify appropriate terminology with which to refer to it. Yet the slides also represent an opportunity to diversify the curation of military history, which still often lags behind in even the inclusion of marginalised groups whose representation has become commonplace elsewhere in the museum sector. Despite substantial historical scholarship addressing the 'shifting gender boundaries' precipitated by the First World War (for an overview see Rachamimov 2012, 291; Robb and Pattinson 2017b), and a growing conviction among historians that military history should be treated as gendered history (Hagemann and Schüler-Springorum 2002, x) some war museums still struggle to include even cisgender women, let alone trans possibility (Brandon 2010). The Knockaloe

slides, considered critically, offer a chance to prompt a radical – and, I will argue, both academically and politically valuable – shift in military curatorial practice.

Curating gender nonconformity: issues at stake

The task of curating conflict is, as I argued above, an endeavour distinct from the task of assessing it historiographically. When devising curatorial approaches to objects such as the Knockaloe slides, it is crucial to examine the key issues at stake when developing curatorial representations of past gender nonconformity – both in general, and in the specific context of the war museum – to ensure that any outputs are socially as well as historiographically responsible.

A growing body of evidence suggests that museums and other heritage spaces are not socially neutral: their 'decisions and choices' 'have social and political effects and consequences' which 'impact individuals' lives and influence more broadly the relations between mainstream and marginalised communities' (Sandell 2012, 212). This impact results partly from the authority that the public perceive museums to hold (Ott 2010, 270-71). In the case of war museums, Ana Carden-Coyne argues that 'communities...expect that a balanced view of conflict will be presented more than in the mass media or the political arena' (2010, 69). Acknowledging trans possibility in a war museum can therefore powerfully validate the existence of trans people in history: where a museum devoted to LGBT experience might be perceived as not 'balanced', and its accounts of trans possibility in internment camps as thereby unreliable, including trans history within the 'reliable' war museum space makes those accounts appear reliable by association.

Why does this matter? In answering this question – and in relating it specifically to the acknowledgement of trans possibility in an exhibition devoted to military history – we need to consider potential impact on visitors (both trans and cisgender) alongside wider

political context. Firstly, as noted above, museum representation for marginalised groups has emotional significance and the potential to combat real and felt isolation (Dodd et al. 2010, 98-99; Delin 2002, 95; Bauer 2017, 9-10; Dinshaw 1999, 21). I am not here calling for the prioritisation of trans visitors, but for the consideration of their museum experience on an equal footing with cisgender visitors, and the recognition that this minority has a significantly greater stake in the curatorial representation of trans people than does the cisgender majority (Kapusta 2016, 507-08; c.f. Smith 2010, 66). Secondly, and more importantly, the validation of trans history carries political weight. Most existing research on museum diversity focuses on groups whose historical *existence* is not frequently cast publicly into doubt – but trans history is not only 'hidden history' (Laurence 1994, 3), but also contested history, in that its very validity is frequently challenged by historians (e.g. Oram 2006, 277-78) and by the mainstream media. What Jay Prosser calls 'the "market theory" of transsexuality' – 'the critical commonplace that the term "transsexual" and the availability of the medical technologies of plastic surgery and endocrinology conjoined to create transsexuality, that the transsexual did not exist until s/he was named' – pervades both academic and popular discourse. As Prosser rightly observes, this discourse 'underlies the popular derogation of transsexuals [in Prosser's terms, trans people who have undergone medical transition] as literally constructed: that is, not real men and women but ersatz' (Prosser 1998, 128). Consequently, popular arguments against the validity of modern trans people's identities frequently equate historicity with contemporary realness: the claimed status of trans identities as 'fad' or 'invention' is used to argue (for example) that we should not respect trans people's authority concerning their own genders, and that we should deny trans children access to treatment (e.g. Hitchens 2017; Waiton 2017; Transgender Trend n.d.).[2] As Cheryl Morgan argues, while 'All of LGBT history has suffered from erasure', 'in the case of trans people

the charge that we did not exist, at all, before the twentieth century, is very precisely being used to deny us the right to exist now' (2017a).

As I argued above, the contestation of trans histories goes beyond direct denial and includes unthinking use of particular gendered nouns or pronouns. Historiographical approaches to female-presenting AMAB people in military contexts largely refer to them as 'men' and allude to ideas of disguise: they are 'men in costume', 'men in drag', or 'female impersonators' (Rachamimov 2014, 120; Makepeace 2017a, 94; Sigel 2016, 103). This discourse is not harmless or neutral. Firstly, it alludes (as Prosser argues) to the idea of trans identities as 'ersatz, fake, made up': intentionally or not, this echoes the anti-trans newspapers cited above (e.g. Pollard 2017; Murray 2017). Secondly, research indicates that encountering apparent misgendering such as this in curatorial contexts may have a disproportionately negative effect on trans visitors (Humphry 2016, 36).[3] Misgendering should be taken to refer additionally to the use of quotation marks around female pronouns or names (Humphry 2016, 26); and to 'deadnaming', the use of the name given to a person at birth and subsequently disavowed by them.[4]

These issues have important implications for the curation of the Knockaloe slides. Erasing all mention of marginalised groups and refusing to acknowledge the possibility of their historicity in a museum context is not, as Sandell and Dodd have argued, politically neutral (2010, 20-21). Advocating for the recognition of trans possibility in images of female presentation from Knockaloe – that is, taking seriously the possibility that some of these images show internees whose female presentation was motivated by its congruence with their gendered subjectivity – can have a positive effect on the wellbeing of marginalised trans visitors. Moreover, it can challenge the popular discourse that invalidates modern trans identities by presenting them as recently constructed and lacking historicity. It is vital, then,

that spaces perceived as authoritative and objective – like war museums – participate in validating the existence of trans history when they have the opportunity to do so.

Charges of anachronism or overly imaginative interpretation are a realistic prospect for a heritage institution that adopts such an approach. However, in navigating these accusations, it is important to recognise that they are overwhelmingly levelled at those historians and curators who seek to represent marginalised history; and that what constitutes 'the margins' is, clearly, contextually contingent and subject to temporal shifts (Sandell 2016, 75; Younge 2012, 109, 111). As Oliver Winchester points out, over time we become fixed into thinking that a certain interpretation is the most natural one, which does not constitute 'over-reading' (2012, 142). Moreover, historical curation is not an exercise in objectivity: owing to the necessarily partial nature of historical evidence, the construction of a historical narrative inevitably involves imaginative elements (Martinez 2014). If suggesting that the Knockaloe slides depict trans possibility appears to involve a greater leap of imagination than other aspects of historical curation, this is likely a consequence of the fact that any given person's construction of a historical narrative is informed by their own experience (Martinez 2014, 170-71). This, then, is an argument in favour of the developing consensus that ethical curation should involve sustained dialogue with those who are to be represented in an exhibition (McIntyre 2007, 50; Sandell 2012; c.f. Kapusta 2016, 504).

Communicating polyvalence: motivations for offstage female presentation

In making recommendations for the specific content of curatorial interpretation of the Knockaloe slides, the central remaining question concerns the communication of the factors that motivated some internees to present as female, particularly in non-theatrical contexts. Although these motivations have attracted substantial scholarly attention, the possibility that some female-presenting internees were motivated by the desire to present their gender in a

way that felt congruent with their gendered sense of self has not been subject to serious consideration. Here, I argue that this possibility deserves to be taken seriously by scholars alongside other interpretations, and to be addressed alongside them as part of a polyvocal curatorial approach to the slides.

Current historiographical consensus holds that female-presenting internees represented 'substitute women' who were crucial to establishing a sense, within the camp, of home or *Heimat*: 'an untranslatable German word meaning "home, homeland, roots, native heath, hearth and home"' of which female presence was an essential part (Draskau 2009, 188, 193; Makepeace 2017b, 73). These internees, it is argued, 'helped to keep the outside world alive', mitigating the effects on other internees of being 'held against their will in an all-male environment away from...their families' (Panayi 2014, 121). Supplementing this line of argument, some historians have suggested that, if onstage female presentation helped to create this sense of home and normality, continuing this presentation offstage constituted an essential part of 'sustaining the illusion' (Draskau 2009, 195-96; Reiss 2013, 16-17).

The case for incorporating trans possibility as a valid consideration alongside these arguments must begin with an assessment of the conceptual understanding of cross-gender identification during the early twentieth century. During this period, as the emerging discipline of sexology formulated concepts of homosexual and trans identities, understanding of gender and sexuality was at a moment of intense development (Cocks and Houlbrook 2006b, 4; Waters 2006). The two were conflated in the concept of 'inversion', which held homosexuality to *result from* 'cross-gender identification': 'the male "invert" had the body of a man, but the sexual desires of a woman, and vice versa' (Oram 2006, 270). Although inversion has largely been interpreted by modern historians as a conceptual equivalent of homosexuality – partly as a result of its popularity during the interwar period as a category of identification for British people who experienced same-sex attraction (Waters 1998) –

Prosser has argued convincingly that 'what sexologists sought to describe through sexual inversion was not homosexuality but differing degrees of gender inversion', and therefore that the idea of inversion provided conceptual and lexical mechanisms for discussing cross-gender identification (1998, 117). Additionally, in 1910, German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld coined the term 'transvestite'. This term indicated 'a much wider range of transsexual and transgender phenomena and identities' than the narrow, sensationalised connotations it has today (Bauer 2017, 84): in Hirschfeld's words, it referred to 'men who from the point of view of their character are fully to be regarded as women' (Hirschfeld 1937, 148).

Although the multinational nature of camps like Knockaloe should not be overstated – many internees were culturally British, with some descended from seventeenth-century immigrants (Draskau 2009, 187-88) – it is fair to state that many had closer links to continental Europe than did the majority of the British population. This, given that sexology 'remained chiefly a continental "science"' at this point (Houlbrook 2006, 79) – notwithstanding a growing circulation in Britain by 1914 (Waters 2006, 48) – potentially gave them greater access to the circulation and discussion of sexological ideas, and to terminology and concepts with which to articulate their gendered experience. This said, the acknowledgement of trans possibility in history should not be restricted to those people who were educated enough to have access to sexological vocabulary; this would exclude many internees at Knockaloe, which was a socioeconomically diverse camp (Cohen-Portheim 1931, 41). The real value of sexological texts for the study of the motivations behind the female presentation shown in the Knockaloe slides is their case studies – autobiographical and biographical elements which have, as Prosser argues, 'been underread in comparison with the sexologists' theoretical passages' (1998, 117). Importantly, while the subjects of these case studies largely did not name or categorise their experience, they demonstrate a correlation

between onstage female presentation and internal sense of female gender. One patient of Krafft-Ebing's, for example, who 'had a definite feeling of preferring to be a young lady' – and expresses a desire for castration – reports that 'I took especial pleasure in masquerade costumes, – i.e., only in female attire' (Krafft-Ebing 1894, 203-04; see also 221, 282-83, 297-98). The subjects of these case studies largely did not name or categorise their experience, but their gendered subjectivity is nonetheless clearly articulated.

Three decades later, Hirschfeld specifically identified female presentation in military theatres as a site of trans experience, arguing that the 'joy' some soldiers found in this was evidence of 'unmistakable transvestitism' (1937, 254-55). He quotes a lieutenant who recalls suggesting to his companions that a soldier presenting as female onstage 'was acting in accordance with his own nature, that his performance was virtually an expression of his real self and probably brought him intense satisfaction' (1937, 150-51). This demonstrates that the idea of AMAB people using the stage to express their female identities could be conceived of in an early twentieth-century European military context. However, the lieutenant goes on to report that his companions could not understand, or would not acknowledge, this possibility – suggesting that it may well have been possible for people in military contexts to conceal their motivations for female presentation if they wished to do so.

Onstage female presentation, then, was a recognisable outlet for AMAB people to express female gendered subjectivity in this period – lending weight to the content that the images of female-presenting internees at Knockaloe represent trans possibility as well as the possibility of masquerade. Similarly, analysis of the circumstances concerning offstage female presentation suggests that this was willing, rather than coerced – increasing the likelihood that some were motivated by a desire to continue expressing their gender in a way that was congruent with their sense of self. Playing a female role onstage does not seem to have inevitably committed an internee to living as female offstage. Some internees, in fact,

explicitly refused to ‘sustain the illusion’ in this way. Draskau reports an episode at Knockaloe in which one actor responded to being described in feminine terms ‘with a three-page retort’ in a camp newspaper, protesting, ‘I am not a Fraulein, and I'm certainly not beautiful!’ (2009, 198). Similarly, soldier Erwin Piscator described his experience of onstage female presentation at the Western Front as ‘an ordeal’ (Vetter 2014, 22). This evidence suggests that, if internees did not want to present as female offstage, they would not have been compelled to do so in the name of ‘sustaining the illusion’; and that if they found the experience uncomfortable, they were free to express their displeasure.

In constructing this argument in favour of acknowledging trans possibility, it is not my intention to disparage or discredit the other interpretations of female presentation that I have cited. Rather, I want to argue for the acknowledgement of the possibility that this female presentation had multiple valences and motivations, particularly at an individual level. It is possible, for example, for a community as a whole to decide (explicitly or implicitly) that female presentation onstage and offstage would help to establish a sense of *Heimat* within the camp, and for some individuals to decide that they would participate in this female presentation because such presentation felt comfortable and allowed them to express their gendered subjectivity more accurately. It is also possible for other factors to have simultaneously motivated the internees. Where Rachamimov argues, ‘drag is by definition ambivalent’ (2006, 364), I would supplement, ‘AMAB experience of female presentation is polyvalent’: some female-presenting AMAB people experience their gender presentation as entertainment in line with drag or ‘female impersonator’ culture, some as facilitating the creation of a familiar mixed-gender society within an unfamiliar environment, some as a means to enable them to express sexual or romantic attraction towards men, and some as an opportunity to live and present in a way that aligns with their sense of their own gender.

I have emphasised this polyvalence at length, and have used the language of *possibility* throughout this article, to indicate that I do not favour a homogenising approach to curating the Knockaloe slides, or indeed a monovocal curatorial narrative. In other words, I am not arguing that an object label for a slide showing a female-presenting internee should be captioned 'trans woman', but that interpretation accompanying the slides should include the pertinent information cited above – that some internees lived as female offstage, and were viewed as female by others – and suggest that, in some cases, this offstage female presentation may have been motivated by a desire to express female gendered subjectivity.

This consideration of the multiple possible ways in which internees may have experienced female presentation – and, therefore, of the 'various meanings' (Sandell 2007, 196) of the Knockaloe slides – aligns my arguments with the recent move towards 'polyvocality' in curatorial practice (Corsane 2005b, 9; Sandell and Dodd 2010, 16). Although the paucity of quotable trans (or cisgender) internee voices presents a challenge to this polyvocal approach, it need not prove prohibitive. As the Swedish Exhibition Agency has suggested, imagined narratives can function to call attention to the possible existence of unrecorded real, historical narratives (2015, 39-40; see also Bauer 2017, 1-2). Consequently, I suggest that the use of several imagined female-presenting internees' voices – alongside those of real, male-presenting internees (e.g. Cohen-Portheim 1931; Dunbar-Kalckreuth 1940) – would provide an effective means to communicate the polyvalent nature of the Knockaloe slides to museum visitors. First-person articulation of the different possible motivations for female presentation at Knockaloe – as in the following example – would be a clear and engaging method of navigating the fact that it is impossible to know what motivated every female-presenting individual, while avoiding erasing any interpretations, or privileging some over others:

'I'm Alf, and I think this is a right laugh! Me in a dress!'

> ‘I’m Hans, and this is just acting. Someone’s got to play the women’s parts, so I’m taking one for the team!’
>
> ‘I’m Jack, and I really miss my wife, but this makes me feel a bit better.’
>
> ‘I’m Laszlo, and I’m attracted to men: this way, I get to look at them unapologetically.’
>
> ‘I’m Frida, and actually I’ve always wanted to live as female, because this is how I feel most comfortable.’

This approach would also, I suggest, provide a valuable means of avoiding homogenisation of a large and diverse group of civilian internees, mitigating the lingering dehumanising effects of the policy of large-scale civilian internment.

It remains possible that the curatorial approach I advocate will provoke accusations of ahistorical speculation. In response, I want to call attention to a prediction made by Elaine Heumann Gurian in 2005. ‘In twenty-five years,’ Gurian argues, ‘museums will become more comfortable with presentations that contain a multiplicity of viewpoints and with the interweaving of scientific fact and what is considered *by some, but not others*, to be “myth”’ (2005, 71; emphasis added). This crucial formulation calls attention to the impossibility of attaining consensus on the validity of all assertions made about history – something which should be seen by curators as a tool of liberation. If it is impossible to satisfy all visitors, we should feel free to experiment with approaches that may lead to challenging reactions from some, but to positive social benefits for others. Acknowledging trans possibility in a museum context has the potential to broaden the appeal of an exhibition to trans visitors; to educate interested cisgender visitors; and to combat the politically instrumentalised erasure of trans

history, making active and constructive use of museums' inevitable social agency in the pursuit of equality.

Conclusion

This article has argued the case for acknowledging the possibility that some of the AMAB people who presented as female in early twentieth-century military contexts – including, but not limited to, the people pictured in the Knockaloe slides – were motivated in whole or in part by a desire to express their gender in a way that felt comfortable for them, or congruent with their gendered sense of self. I have used the term 'trans possibility' to denote this throughout, not in order to fix these past subjects in modern identity categories, but as a way of calling attention to and making visible a significantly underacknowledged interpretive strand, and of signalling my awareness that validating the historicity of modern trans experience is a socially and politically valuable endeavour. With the social agency of museums and other heritage institutions in mind, I have argued that any forthcoming curation of the slides showing female presentation at Knockaloe must acknowledge this trans possibility, alongside discussing other motivations for this behaviour.

While my arguments have focused on the curation of the slides, I hope that this article will also prompt a shift in the discourse with which historians address gender and military internment, and indeed historical gender nonconformity more broadly. There is substantial historical research to support 'the notion that World War I led to some blurring and redefinition of gender roles' (Rachamimov 2012, 291), and it is understandably tempting to consider female presentation within internment camps predominantly as part of that wider narrative. I do not argue for the abandonment of such broad societal analyses, but for the complementary consideration of the multiplicity of individual experiences within them, and for a more mindful approach to the use of gendered language. Historians must recognise that

gendered nouns and pronouns, quotation marks, discourses of disguise and impersonation, and categories of analysis that refer to military internment camps as 'all-male environments' all constitute non-neutral interpretive stances which themselves fix the subjects of discussion in particular identity categories. More broadly, our methodological approach to widespread practices such as military female presentation must reflect its polyvalence: rather than seeking to establish a single truth at the expense of other possibilities, we should acknowledge the likelihood that different experiences of the same activity could coexist within a group.

My call here is to historians of military internment, not solely to those who would consider themselves practitioners of queer history. Similarly, I have maintained throughout this article that acknowledgement of the trans possibility evoked by the Knockaloe slides should be integrated alongside discussion of other motivations for female presentation in military contexts, rather than advocating for an LGBT-focused exhibition or display within a military heritage space. Both decisions have been deliberate. While a growing body of scholarship addresses the curatorial representation of LGBT people, the bulk of this still concerns exhibitions with a solely – one could argue, ghettoised – LGBT focus.[5] While LGBT-focused exhibitions are valuable, both scholars and heritage practitioners have paid far less attention to the inclusion of LGBT (and specifically trans) dimensions in exhibitions whose primary focus lies elsewhere. Exhibitions whose primary, and stated, aim is to represent trans history are easy for potential audiences to dismiss – either as irrelevant to their interests, or as biased in their highlighting of a history whose validity and existence is still persistently called into question by the mainstream media. Exhibitions which incorporate trans dimensions into wider narratives, conversely, have the potential to reach much wider audiences, and to send the powerful message that trans experience is simply one aspect of the wider spectrum of human experience in a particular context or time period (Sandell 2016,

156). This article, then, constitutes a call for curators and scholars of military history not to focus exclusively on queer experiences of wartime, but to participate in 'mining and reinterpreting existing collections' and scholarship to construct new narratives and hermeneutic approaches (Sandell 2007, 170; see also 2016, 156) – and to think critically about the conscious and unconscious gendered assumptions about the past that have informed our work. A queer intervention in the curation – and the historiographical analysis – of conflict is long overdue.

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[1] For more detail on gender nonconformity in military and theatrical contexts, see also Sigel 2016; Rachamimov 2006; Boxwell 2002; Moore and Hately 2014; Halladay 2004; Fuller 1990. For more on non-military theatre, see Oram 2006; Bullough and Bullough 1993; Garber 1992; Cook 1993.

[2] In fact, as Stryker has explored, there are numerous interlinked reasons for this increased interest in trans issues, including 'increased visibility' fostered by the internet; 'new ideas about how representation works in the age of digital media'; reassessment of 'totalising' binaries influenced by the Cold War; and the promise that 'everything would be different' as technology advanced with the approaching millennium (Stryker 2017, 42-44).

[3] For more on the harms caused by misgendering, see Kapusta 2016, 502-03.

[4] Tate Britain's 2017 'Queer British Art' exhibition was criticised by trans visitors for deadnaming, particularly in relation to its treatment of the artists Gluck and Claude Cahun (Morgan 2017b; Harris 2017).

[5] A recent example is the 'Museum of Transology' (see Museum of Transology 2015).

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Figure captions

Figure 1. Knockaloe internees presenting as female on stage. © Manx National Heritage (PG/7870/41026)

Figure 2. A Knockaloe internee presenting as female in a context that is not obviously theatrical, accompanied by an internee presenting as a male partner. © Manx National Heritage (PG/7870/38771)

Figure 3. Knockaloe internees, one of whom (left) is wearing some typically female clothing, again in a non-theatrical context. © Manx National Heritage (PG/7870/37662)