

# Documenting Student-led Queer Performance on the Texas A&M University Campus

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**Abstract:** This paper introduces a new qualitative study under development, focused on documenting student-led Queer performance on the Texas A&M University campus. The paper discusses the study's background, methodology, and expected results, as well as some challenges and dilemmas caused by the current political climate in the State of Texas. The study takes place within the larger context of performance documentation and archiving, the author's main research interest.

## Introduction

This paper introduces a new qualitative study, under development, focused on documenting student-led Queer performance on the Texas A&M University campus. The paper discusses the study's background, methodology, and expected results, as well as some challenges and dilemmas caused by the current political climate in the State of Texas. The study takes place within the larger context of performance documentation and archiving, which is my main research interest. The study focuses on two events on campus: The Coming Out Monologues and DRAGgieland, with the goal of documenting the relevance of these events and the work of the people who make them happen.

## Positionality Statement

It is important to clarify that I am a white, straight, cis-gender, Italian woman, who is an ally of the Queer communities. My allyship developed over time, and in many ways: through interaction with friends and relatives; by living in an inclusive town; by engagement with the work of Queer artists (such as Italian director Luchino Visconti); by engagement with Queer colleagues; and by engagement with the Queer collections at the Cushing Memorial Library & Archives at Texas A&M University. The historical challenges posed by the political and social climate (for example, the AIDS crisis in the 1980s) have strengthened my commitment to Queer communities, and the current state of affairs in Texas further reinforces my commitment to protecting Queer rights.

## Background and Research Problem Statement

### Author's Research Interests

My research interests focus on the performing arts and on ways to document them. I view archives as allies to democracy and inclusivity, in line with the views of South African archivist Verne Harris and others.<sup>1</sup> Susan Alteri states that Harris "puts forth an archives for the future, one where the archivist is not a neutral objective party, as Western archival theory has taught us to be, but one in which archivists play a political and active role in the creation of social memory."<sup>2</sup> In previous research articles, I have argued that the performing arts play a role in social memory and democracy.<sup>3</sup> I support an active approach to documentation, in line with what is defined as documentation strategies. Helen Willa Samuels writes that: "Documentation strategies...do not start with surveys of available materials. They begin with detailed investigations of the topic to be documented and the information required. The concern is less with what exist than what should exist."<sup>4</sup> I also support the creation of new documentation, for example through interviews and oral histories, which are "a way of gathering, recording, and preserving a diverse range of personal experiences."<sup>5</sup> Documentation through videography and other means is also essential to record



aspects of performances and performance creation, although the entire experience differs from person to person and is ephemeral, so it cannot be captured in its entirety. Documentation also remains dynamic; as I stated in other articles, “materials created in relation to a production are dynamic entities, and some never become fixed; for example, scripts get annotated and reused... Archives have to accommodate this vitality.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Student-led Campus Queer Performance**

Since I started working at Texas A&M University in 2014, I developed an interest in campus student-led Queer performance, for a variety of reasons. First, as I mentioned earlier, I am an ally of the Queer communities. Second, I am interested in documenting student-led performance on campus as a whole, which includes historical troupes like the Aggie Players, as well as current organizations involved in improv, theatre and more. Third, through my work at the Cushing Memorial Library & Archives (2014-2022) I have experienced and supported its Queer collections and I have come to know the wonderful people involved with them; I have also come to know different campus events, specifically The Coming Out Monologues and DRAGgieland. In my current role of Associate Professor in the new School of Performance, Visualization & Fine Arts, I want to help document the work of those who make these events happen.

The Coming Out Monologues is an event that used to be organized by the LGBTQ+ Pride Center, but, because of new State legislation (discussed later in this paper), is now moving to a new student organization, the Queer Empowerment Council (QEC). The Coming Out Monologues started in 2009 at Texas A&M University, organized by the Women’s & Gender Issues Resource Center. It was originally created in 2007 by Nancy Tubbs (a Texas A&M University graduate) at the University of California, Riverside, inspired by the play *The Vagina Monologues* (1996) by V (formerly Eve Ensler); and it was initially part of the National Day of Silence.<sup>7</sup> The Coming Out Monologues is story-telling performance, open to current and former students, faculty, staff, community members and allies. Performers take different approaches in telling life stories (monologue, art, dance, and more). It is an event that invites everyone into understanding one’s perspective, joys, and struggles, and creates empathy and support. It is transformative performance, both for the performers and the audience, and is based on collaboration. The impact of this event has been recently assessed by the LGBTQ+ Pride Center, through a 2023 survey;<sup>8</sup> responses included comments on the event being “empowering.”<sup>9</sup>

DRAGgieland (a play on words, with Aggieland being the way people refer to Texas A&M University) is a student-organized drag performance context, which started in 2020.<sup>10</sup> It initially sparked protests in 2020, and then faced challenges when the University withdrew funding in 2022,<sup>11</sup> but continued to thrive because of the commitment of performers, students, campus and community allies, and a very loyal and enthusiastic audience. The event has regularly been sold out and has received ample local media coverage.

### **Campus Climate and Challenges Faced by Queer Communities and Allies**

Traditionally viewed as a conservative institution, Texas A&M University has been balancing old and new traditions, as the campus moves towards becoming more progressive and open-minded. The campus used to be very unfriendly to Queer communities, but things have changed in a positive way and Queer students, staff and faculty find a more welcoming environment than in the past. Queer communities have faced many challenges in the past, though, and still face many in the present day, including new challenges posed by recently approved State legislation that affects public institutions. Below I discuss some examples of past and present challenges.

#### **Past Challenges**

A famous example of how Queer communities have overcome challenges on campus is the Gay Student Services v. Texas A&M University legal case. The Gay Student Services Organization (GSSO) was founded in 1975; in 1976, under University President John Koldus, Texas A&M University denied official recognition to the organization, and therefore, in February 1977, the students sued the university for violation of their First Amendment right to freedom of speech. After years in the courts, in 1985 the U.S. Supreme Court refused an appeal by Texas A&M University against the decision by the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, which required Texas A&M to recognize the GSSO.

### **Current Campus Climate and New Legislation in Texas**

In 2023, several new challenges were introduced in the State of Texas, because of new anti-Queer and anti-diversity legislation. 141 bills were proposed.<sup>12</sup> Several bills passed, some effective on September 1, 2023, and some effective on January 1, 2024. Senate Bill 14 is against providing medical care for transgender youth;<sup>13</sup> Senate Bill 15 is about “requiring public institution of higher education students who compete in intercollegiate athletic competitions to compete based on biological sex;”<sup>14</sup> the goal of Senate Bill 12 is to: “regulate sexually oriented performances,”<sup>15</sup> and was originally designed to ban drag performance; and Senate Bill 17 bans “diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at public institutions of higher education.”<sup>16</sup> This legislation is causing concern and uneasiness, especially because some of the bills were heavily re-written “on the floor” in House and Senate discussions, and became unclear. This legislation has caused changes on campus, and has negatively affected morale: for example, the Pride Center at Texas A&M University had to modify its mandate, and the programs funded through the Center had to find a new home. Queer communities and their allies continue their work on campus, and the new legislation is being challenged across the State. For example, at the time this paper is being revised for publication, Senate Bill 12 is still undergoing litigation and has not gone into effect, after being temporarily blocked in August 2023 and then declared unconstitutional in September 2023.<sup>17</sup> It is a time of confusion.

At a time like this, it is particularly important to preserve the work of those who have labored to make campus a more welcoming environment for Queer communities. Events like The Coming Out Monologues and DRAGgieland are positive and uplifting ways to affirm Queer rights.

### **Methodology**

In this qualitative study, I will conduct in-depth interviews, and will also use existing sources. After reviewing existing sources and documentation, I will develop interview questions for those involved in The Coming Out Monologues and DRAGgieland. This study is limited to these two campus events. I will employ student researchers who are part of the Queer communities and allies, and I will consult on the study design and approach with some of the key people involved in the events studied. It is essential to approach the study with insight that fully represents the will and intentions of those involved in these events. This is a key characteristic of qualitative research, which “relies on the direct experiences of human beings as meaning-making agents in their everyday lives.”<sup>18</sup> The study is meant to document the events and give recognition to the work of those who organize and participate in The Coming Out Monologues and DRAGgieland. I will maintain confidentiality around the study participants, and make sure that the timing of the study and/or its publication do not interfere with the participants’ privacy and safety.

My main research question is:

- From DRAGgieland to The Coming Out Monologues, forms of Queer performance are becoming established at Texas A&M University: how do we document the performances and the people who make them happen?

Secondary questions include:

- What are the main goals of The Coming Out Monologues and DRAGgieland?
- Who are the main stakeholders associated with these events?
- What impact do these events have on campus climate?
- What challenges do these events face?
- How do these events compare to similar events on other campuses?

The sample of people interviewed will comprise: the main event organizers (student organizations, faculty members and staff, etc.); event performers and audience members who are willing to be interviewed; other University stakeholders; and, for comparison, selected stakeholders at other universities. The Texas A&M interviews will be with people who are, or were, involved in the events. I will start by contacting people I know directly and ask for suggestions for other key players (snowball sampling). I will stop interviewing once saturation is achieved (i.e., no additional data are found when interviewing new people). I am anticipating between twenty and sixty participants. Questions will inquire about: the history and goals of the events; the process of setting up the events and the different components of the events; the experience of organizing and advertising the events; the experience of participating and attending the events; why the interviewees are interested in these events; the actual and anticipated impact of the events; challenges faced by the events and the stakeholders; future plans, concerns and hopes. Follow-up interviews will take place as needed, and if the participants agree to them. The interviews will be conducted in person or via Zoom/teleconference, and audio-recorded, if in-person, or recorded via Zoom.

The study will undergo review by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once the questions are developed, they will be tested on a small sample; if changes are required, the study will be resubmitted to the University for approval.

Interviews will be conducted by myself and at least one student researcher. Data will be manually coded, and themes will be identified and used in answering the research questions. Raw data will not be made available outside of the Principal Investigator (myself) and the student researchers, although individual interviews might be shared in their entirety with the individual interviewees. There are no plans to deposit the raw data in the campus Libraries. To protect the study participants, names will remain confidential and will not be used in publications, conference papers and other types of dissemination. Quotes by participants will have to be approved by them prior to any kind of dissemination.

### **Expected Research Results and Findings**

Since the study is not yet underway, I have no confirmed research results to share. What I expect to gather are rich descriptions of people's experiences, and connections between the events studied and the history of the campus, as well as the history of the State and Queer history at the national level. In terms of findings, I expect to identify a core group of people committed to Queer rights and to making our campus a more welcoming place. I expect the members of this group to be very connected to each other, on campus and within the local community. I also expect to hear stories of allies and why they are engaged in these events, either through co-organizing, participating or attending. I also expect to gather details about a positive influence that these events have on the campus community, as well as about the challenges, fears and frustrations created by administrations and politicians over time. Another expected finding relates to the tension between anti-Queer local Christian influences and pro-Queer local Christian groups and organizations; I also expect to hear about the inner conflict of Queer people who are Christian. Other religions will likely factor in, but Christianity is locally predominant, in incarnations that are at times unsupportive of Queer communities.

With this study, I hope to acknowledge the importance of the events studied, help address campus climate challenges, and contribute to a body of research that supports campus efforts promoting inclusivity and representation. In future studies, I plan on expanding on the study results, and also analyze other forms of student-led performance at Texas A&M and other campuses. I welcome feedback on this study while it is in development.

## Conclusion

The struggle for equal rights is ongoing and it is easy to get discouraged, especially in the current political climate. It is important to acknowledge positive efforts like The Coming Out Monologues and DRAGgieland, while also recognizing the challenges they face. It is also important to document and acknowledge the efforts of everyone who contributes to these events and continues to quietly fight against discrimination. As an archivist and an educator, I advocate for democracy and respect, and consider performance a way to fight for social justice.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Verne Harris, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* (Chicago: The Society of American Archivists, 2007).
2. Susan Alteri, book review of *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* by Verne Harris and Terry Cook, in *Archival Issues* (2006), vol. 30, no. 1: 71 (available online at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41102118>; accessed on November 20, 2023).
3. Francesca Marini, "Performing Arts Archives: Dynamic Entities Complementing and Supporting Scholarship and Creativity," *Theatre History Studies* (2008), vol. 28: 27-35 (available online at: [http://www.interpares.org/display\\_file.cfm?doc=ip2\\_dissemination\\_jar\\_marini\\_ths-28\\_2008.pdf](http://www.interpares.org/display_file.cfm?doc=ip2_dissemination_jar_marini_ths-28_2008.pdf); accessed on November 20, 2023).
4. Helen Willa Samuels, "Who Controls the Past?" in *The American Archivist* (Spring 1986), vol. 49, no. 2: 120 (available online at: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40292980.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Aaa2fc199b3993fb57f2e144ce4eabd38&ab\\_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40292980.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Aaa2fc199b3993fb57f2e144ce4eabd38&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1); accessed on November 20, 2023).
5. Susie Dalton, "What are oral histories and why are they important?" in Glasgow Women's Library Blog, 9 August 2017 (available online at: <https://womenslibrary.org.uk/2017/08/09/what-are-oral-histories-and-why-are-they-important/>; accessed on November 20, 2023).
6. Marini, "Performing Arts Archives": 32.
7. Mia Mercer, "The Coming-Out Monologues: A Platform for Aggieland's LGBTQIA+ Community," in News, College of Arts & Sciences, April 1, 2021 (available online at: <https://liberalarts.tamu.edu/blog/2021/04/01/the-coming-out-monologues-a-platform-for-aggielands-lgbtqia-community/>; accessed on November 20, 2023).
8. Texas A&M University Student Life/LGBTQ+ Pride Center, "The Coming Out Monologues/Assessment," Spring 2023, available online at: [https://dsasp.tamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/gravity\\_forms/1-31adc2d288a7c21d2f2223eda0ba5bb3/2023/05/Coming-Out-Monologues-Spring-2023-Summary-Report.pdf?gv-iframe=true#:~:text=The%20Coming%20Out%20Monologues%20is,or%20as%20straight%20cisgender%20allies](https://dsasp.tamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/gravity_forms/1-31adc2d288a7c21d2f2223eda0ba5bb3/2023/05/Coming-Out-Monologues-Spring-2023-Summary-Report.pdf?gv-iframe=true#:~:text=The%20Coming%20Out%20Monologues%20is,or%20as%20straight%20cisgender%20allies;); accessed on November 20, 2023).
9. Ibid.: 2.
10. The Texas A&M University student newspaper, *The Battalion*, regularly covers DRAGgieland; for example: Meredith Seaver, "Gallery: DRAGgieland 2020" in *The Battalion*, February 20,

- 2020 (updated February 24, 2020; available online at: [https://www.thebatt.com/multimedia/photos/gallery-draggieland-2020/collection\\_69349bea-53b5-11ea-b153-739e05eced44.html](https://www.thebatt.com/multimedia/photos/gallery-draggieland-2020/collection_69349bea-53b5-11ea-b153-739e05eced44.html); accessed on November 20, 2023).
11. Maria Carrasco, "Texas A&M Defunds Annual Drag Show," in *Inside Higher Ed*, April 19, 2022 (available online at: <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2022/04/20/texas-am-defunds-annual-drag-show>; accessed on November 20, 2023).
  12. Equality Texas, "Legislative Bill Tracker 2023" (available online at: <https://www.equalitytexas.org/legislature/legislative-bill-tracker-2023/>; accessed on November 20, 2023).
  13. The Legislature of the State of Texas, "S.B. No. 14," final approval on May 28, 2023 (available online at: <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/88R/billtext/pdf/SB00014F.pdf#navpanes=0>; accessed on November 20, 2023).
  14. The Legislature of the State of Texas, "S.B. No. 15," final approval on May 26, 2023 (available online at: <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/88R/billtext/pdf/SB00015F.pdf#navpanes=0>; accessed on November 20, 2023).
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  17. Alejandro Serrano and William Melhado, "Texas' Ban on Certain Drag Shows is Unconstitutional, Federal Judge Says," in *The Texas Tribune*, September 27, 2023. (available online at: <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/09/26/texas-drag-queen-law-unconstitutional/>; accessed November 20, 2023).
  18. University of Texas Arlington Libraries, "Quantitative and Qualitative Research: What is qualitative research?" LibGuide, last updated on October 12, 2023 (available online at: [https://libguides.uta.edu/quantitative\\_and\\_qualitative\\_research/qual](https://libguides.uta.edu/quantitative_and_qualitative_research/qual); accessed November 20, 2023).

## Resources

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