

Queer Reflections: New Views from Library Drag Storytimes

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Abstract:

*In 1990, Rudine Sims Bishop authored a seminal article, *Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors*, describing the power of children’s multicultural literature. Sims Bishop noted that, as literature enthusiasts, we believe that potential connections between children and books can be life changing. In order for connections to happen, there have to be many kinds of stories with many kinds of characters to reflect the lived experience, understanding, and interests of readers.*

This paper seeks to extend on Sims Bishop’s conceptualization and considers how the analogy of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors applies to other aspects of library practice - in terms of library programs, particularly drag queen storytimes. It explores how queens at the library are contributing to community views.

*According to the American Library Association’s (ALA) *Open to All: Serving the GLBT Community in Your Library* (2016), “providing GLBT-friendly programming helps your community know that you are welcoming and accepting.” That said, this informative publication makes no mention of drag queens at the library. While drag has been around for centuries as part of theatre culture and in queer, underground, and/or experimental spaces, it has only come into the mainstream in recent decades with the emergence and immense success of RuPaul’s *Drag Race*. Here, we posit that libraries, as spaces that reflect cultural realities, have begun to echo this increasingly popular pastime.*

This paper offers a review of emergent issues around DQS in libraries and the broader communities in which they are embedded. It is based on content analysis of data drawn from recent articles and reports featuring descriptions of activities and librarian experiences. It includes discussions of twenty programs in the USA and beyond and identifies five key themes around DQS: creativity, diversity, delight, freedom, and pride - as well as future considerations.

Keywords: Children, Community, LGBTQ, Public, Program

INTRODUCTION

In 1990, Rudine Sims Bishop authored a seminal article, Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors, describing the power of children’s multicultural literature. Sims Bishop noted that, as literature enthusiasts, we believe that potential connections between children and books can be life changing. In order for connections to happen, there have to be many kinds of stories with many kinds of characters to reflect the lived experience, understanding, and interests of readers. In recent years, We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), whose aim is to “produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people,” amplifies these notions. WNDB asks us to “imagine a world in which all children can see themselves in the pages of a book.”

Currently, there are many fabulous children’s books written and illustrated by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) authors and/or with LGBTQ+ content such as those included on American Library Association’s (ALA) Rainbow Book Lists - <https://glbtrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks/rainbow-books-lists> and WNDB “Where to Find Diverse Books” - <https://diversebooks.org/resources/where-to-find-diverse-books>. Of course, there is still room for growth in terms of the number of publications, language, inclusion of characters from underrepresented backgrounds/identities, etc. - as well as a need to reduce censorship. As ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) notes, many of the top challenged books in the USA have LGBTQ content.

In *Top 250 LGBTQ Books for Teens*, Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins offer a thoughtful discussion of LGBTQ literature transitions over the past several decades and call for more varied storylines that go beyond coming out - or treating being LGBTQ as a concern to be addressed. That is, there is a need to have more stories that “feature characters whose LGBTQ identity is simply a given” - as well as more diversity in terms of culture, ethnicity, ability, etc. (2015, xiv). In this work, Jenkins describes how she uses a three-part model for reviewing fiction based on a model Sims Bishop developed to categorized changing representations of African-American characters in *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children’s Fiction* (1982). The codes Jenkins uses are Homosexual Visibility (HV), Gay Assimilation (GA), and Queer Consciousness/Community (QC). These phrases parallel the historical evolution of terms used to refer to LGBTQ people/characters. HV emphasizes differences and features coming out - invisibility becoming visible resulting in tension. GA assumes existence with a variety of roles included in stories. This sort of acknowledgement has increased over time. QC titles feature LGBTQ characters portrayed realistically as diverse members of the greater community. They have broad potential to appeal to all readers. While these three categories are not mutually exclusive, the trend has moved from primarily HV toward GA and into QC.

Similar to Jenkins’ model adapted to consider LGBTQ character representations based on Sims Bishop’s conceptualization, this paper extends on her analogy of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. As Sims Bishop demonstrates, books offer new perspectives. We assert that this is also the case for library programs, particularly drag queen storytimes (DQS). They offer participants new views. In this article, we explore what queens at the library are contributing to community understanding and experience.

According to George M. Eberhart, senior editor of *American Libraries*, the magazine of the ALA (2010),

A library is a collection of resources in a variety of formats that is (1) organized by information professionals or other experts who (2) provide convenient physical, digital, bibliographic, or intellectual access and (3) offer targeted services and programs (4) with the mission of educating, informing, or entertaining a variety of audiences (5) and the goal of stimulating individual learning and advancing society as a whole.”

Drawing on this definition, DQS may be considered a targeted program with the mission of educating, informing, and/or entertaining children and other community members and advancing society as a whole.

ALA’s Open to All: Serving the GLBT Community in Your Library (2016) discusses how “providing GLBT-friendly programming helps your community know that you are welcoming and accepting.” That said, this informative publication makes no mention of drag queens at the library. Neither do other open and popular resources such as the Wikipedia page on Libraries and the LGBTQ Community. This lack of inclusion is likely due to the recent emergence of programs featuring drag queens at libraries.

At this time, DQS is considered in several professional forums such as the 2019-20 ALA Diversity Research Grant Program funded projects. One will explore “Library Staff and Drag Queen Perspectives and Decision-Making About Drag Queen Storytimes.” Additionally, the most recent Public Library Association Conference hosted a session entitled, “Drag Queen Story Hour: Reading Fabulously” where participants learned about setting up DQS; strategies for explaining this groundbreaking and potentially controversial programming; and titles for children’s programs exploring gender fluidity. Furthermore, ALA’s State of America’s Libraries 2019 mentions DQS several times and notes “2018 saw a surge of interest in drag queen story hours, all-ages storytime programs where performance artists read stories with messages of love and acceptance” - as well as increased media coverage and protest. Not surprisingly, given the range of responses to DQS, including challenges, the ALA OIF has developed a set of resources linked to the hashtag #LibrariesRespond to support librarians as they navigate these uncharted waters and establish and develop DQS programming based on community interests in alignment with local library policies. As DQS popularity continues to rise, we can expect to see more research, publications, and responses.

Drag has been around for centuries as part of theatre culture and in queer, underground, and/or experimental spaces. As Trixie Mattel describes, “drag solidified itself as a gay art form” in the mid-twentieth century. It has only come into the mainstream in recent decades with the emergence and immense success of RuPaul’s Drag Race. Libraries, as spaces that reflect cultural realities, have begun to echo this increasingly popular pastime. While drag is not unidimensional, this paper posits that the art of drag is magical. In this study, we consider how this magical queerness fits into the broader library agenda.

This paper offers a review of emergent issues around DQS in libraries and the broader communities in which they are embedded. It is based on conversations with librarians and drag queens; and content analysis of data drawn from recently published articles and reports featuring descriptions of activities and experiences with twenty DQS. Methodology is discussed in the next section followed by some program examples, themes, and finally future possibilities.

METHODOLOGY

In order to consider this topic, we reviewed professional literature, news articles, and other online resources. Additionally, twenty American librarians generously shared insights about DQS during in-person and online conversations during May-August, 2019. Online informants responded to a prompt on the ALA GLBT-RT list serv: “I would appreciate if you would send me flyers, ads, press releases, links to (positive or negative) news articles, etc. for drag queen storytimes offered at your library.” Those who replied shared these documents as well as details of their experiences and opinions. All data was analyzed using grounded theory and five main categories emerged. These themes are presented below following a discussion of programs. A note about language: we use the terms drag queen storytime (DQS) and drag queen story hour (DQSH) interchangeably in the article.

PROGRAMS

First things first. Bix (Barbara) Warden, Children’s Librarian at San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) shared (via email) that “Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH) was conceived of by Michelle Tea, as part of RADAR Productions' programming.” Juliana Delgado Lopera from RADAR contacted Bix at the Eureka Valley/Harvey Milk Memorial Branch Library in the Castro and asked if they would be interested in hosting this event. The Castro District is a neighborhood in San Francisco that is synonymous with LGBTQ activism. The first DQSH program took place on December 12th, 2015. SFPL has since hosted a number of DQSH events - and Bix noted they have not received any serious challenges. All of the queens in their programs work with children in their "default" lives, and the idea of the programs is to support and celebrate diversity.

DQS events are promoted via various channels - like other library programs. The Facebook photo used for the first program is shown in Figure 1. The Facebook event caption read, “Join Radar for our kick-off Drag Queen Story Hour! Welcome to people of all ages, but designed especially for kids. Come listen to children’s stories read by Persia! Then stay and get your face painted.” The post included an extensive biography for the drag queen:

Persia was born from the burgeoning creative mind of a child in South Central Los Angeles. With degrees from the University of California, Santa Cruz and the San Francisco Art Institute in one hand, and a few pairs of heels in the other, she set out to conquer and revolutionize the drag community. Persia began performing weekly at Esta Noche, the recently closed Latino gay bar in San Francisco. Whilst performing at events around the Bay Area, in Los Angeles, and Mexico—including a few quinceañeras— Persia has also curated art shows, done stand-up, appeared on a few television shows, modeled, and has represented SFMOMA by transforming into Matisse’s “Woman with a hat.” All while working as a teacher's assistant in a Children's After School Arts Program called CASA, a program focused on social justice.

While many folks consider drag primarily a form of adult entertainment, Persia’s multidimensional biography denotes more. It features community connections, illustrates a broad range of interests, and links to various venues for expression and employment. If Persia is popular and effective in so many contexts, why wouldn’t she be offering DQS at the public library?

The Facebook event description also indicated that Radar Productions curated public events that support emerging queer artists and bona fide superstars. They promote talent. The promotional photo from this landmark event is featured in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Promo Photo for First Drag Queen Story Hour at SFPL (via [Facebook](#))

Of course, not all cities (or towns or rural areas) in the US or elsewhere can rely on the progressive attitudes and support for LGBTQ activities like those found in San Francisco. Fortunately, SFPL and other DQS pioneers provide helpful models for librarians considering launching programs - especially in this age of digital sharing. Below, we share several more examples we have selected to represent the growing range of approaches to DQS hosted by libraries and other community venues.

The fabulous GiGi Mayonaé, first offered DQS in Danville, Illinois in 2018. This event was originally planned to be hosted by the public library, but was cancelled after some members of the community responded negatively. Although the library ultimately wasn't willing and/or able to host DQS, the program was rescheduled and offered at the local civic center. GiGi was dedicated to offering fun decorations, stories, crafts, games, and prizes! She hosted a second DQS at the civic center in April 2019 with an Easter theme, which one of the authors had the pleasure of attending. Gigi and a young DQS participant are depicted in Figure 2.

DQS in Danville, Illinois was realized because of the persistence of GiGi Mayonaé. Had she not sought out an alternative venue when the program was cancelled at the library, community members wouldn't have had an opportunity to engage in these fun and engaging activities. In this case, Gigi even had to secure funding for the DQS program.



Figure 2: DQS Featuring GiGi Mayonaé and a Child Asking a Question, Danville, IL, USA

In communities where queer-focused or queer-friendly events are lacking, hosting DQS often involves thinking outside the box. According to the US librarians who shared insights for this project, who represent large and small libraries and communities, the emergence of DQS has generated many new conversations as well as controversy - including protests and counter-protests. It is not surprising that in spaces where queer culture isn't usually celebrated a program celebrating queer culture would be shocking. Perhaps this is a necessary shock?

As young people explore the world, they encounter many challenges. Young people who identify as LGBTQ may have difficulty seeing themselves reflected in books and other media, in their family life, at school, and/or in the broader community. According to a national survey conducted by [GLSEN](#) in 2017, "most LGBTQ students (62.2%) reported experiencing LGBTQ-related discriminatory policies or practices at school." Having access to opportunities to see LGBTQ materials and role models like drag queens at the library or other community venues has the potential to offer positive connections. As Vivica C. Coxx describes in a [CNN interview from May 18, 2019](#) about her performance at a middle school in North Carolina, "Visibility matters, and seeing a queer person of color on stage saying 'this is me' has an impact that no one can really measure."

During the past year, DQS has been featured in a range of news media, including national and international stories. As this queen from New York who was [interviewed by NBC on May 12, 2019](#) describes, storytimes promote literacy, play, and fun. They are intended "to make every kid feel comfortable and have a safe space to explore." Additionally there is hope that children who participate are learning tolerance. That is, "when they grow up and see someone different down the street, they won't treat them any differently because of how they look or act." Of course, adults have different opinions about the appropriateness of DQS and how people should be treated, and this is reflected in media reports as well.

DQS extends beyond the USA. In Chapman's chapter on "Public Library LGBTQ* Provision to Children and Young People," she notes "public libraries in the UK do not have much of a history of LGBTQ-service provision" (2017, 24). Given this, we would expect DQS at public libraries in the UK (and other places with similar history) would encounter some challenges introducing DQS.

DQS has emerged and even been featured at festivals in the UK, such as Homotopia, an annual LGBT+ arts and culture festival started in 2004. In this [BBC interview from March 28, 2019](#), The Nightbus, a drag queen from Liverpool, describes how important it is for children to connect with diverse literature and LGBT role models of colour. They note, "it's vitally important that children are aware that people like me exist. There are people that are brown and queer and a bit chubby and different and it's really important for future generations to see that." The Nightbus wraps up by sharing some hopeful words for a better tomorrow, "there are enough people out there who are willing to embrace a future that doesn't look like today."

DQS offers opportunities for professional collaboration - on par with bringing other guest readers into library programs. As La Prohibida, an immensely popular Spanish drag queen, [explains](#) in a January 5, 2018 blog post, "We are artists, we are professionals, we work for all sorts of audiences."

Of course, not all drag performers are queens, some are kings! In July, 2019, Spruce Grove Public Library in Alberta, Canada launched a Drag King Storytime. This program emerged as part of the library's plan of service, which received public feedback encouraging more diversity and inclusivity at the library. Library assistant Simone Cox, a member of the LGBT community, read stories as drag king Earl Grey and helped children decorate their own teacups. According to the local news report in the [Peace River News Gazette](#), "events like these have gone ahead in Canada without protest or criticism." Perhaps we will see more of this sort of grow-your-own librarians as drag performers emerge - especially in smaller/remote communities where there may not be abundant other (professional) performers in the vicinity? Certainly, (children's) librarians have performed many diverse roles in offering programs throughout our history.

DQS has emerged in many forms across languages and cultures in diverse venues around the globe. The DQSH website offers helpful advice for those planning programs such as being focused on meeting local needs and interests, in addition to considering existing programs and professional resources. As of August 20, 2019, DQSH included forty-two chapter links on their website - and there are others being offered, which are not (yet) included there. For example, the [Facebook page for DQSH México](#) describes its initiatives as part of a project intended to share messages of inclusion and diversity for the entire family with current sites in Monterrey and México City. According to Twitter, DQSH has also been launched in Tokyo. A screenshot featuring an April 13 event is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Drag Queen Story Hour Tokyo, Japan (via [Twitter](#))

On August 17, 2019, DQSH emerged at Mauna Kea on the Big Island of Hawai'i, a sacred site under protection by native Hawaiians. This program sponsored by Pu'uhonua 'o Pu'uhuluhulu featured keiki (children's) books about culturally-relevant themes: akua wahine (goddesses), Hōkūle'a, a Hawaiian voyaging canoe, and mähū, transgender community members. On [Facebook](#), the event was described as providing a different way for kids to learn about Hawaiian culture, inclusivity, and acceptance.



Figure 4: DQSH Mauna Kea Poster (via [Facebook](#))

As librarians consider developing programs, in addition to reviewing materials from DQS and other examples featured in the media, we recommend consulting Jamie Campbell Naidoo's 2018 article, "A Rainbow of Creativity." Naidoo offers thoughtful and informative suggestions for librarians hosting DQS focused on program planning considerations and operationalizing including needs assessment, recruitment, and marketing strategies. For example, Naidoo notes that "it is extremely important that performers working with children in library programs be adequately trained on how to offer a successful literacy and learning experience that is developmentally appropriate. DQS programs should be of equal quality as other library children's programming" (p. 14). Quality assurance requires adequate preparation and training including meeting in advance to discuss key issues like space, story selection, options for other activities (songs, rhymes, puppets, etc.), and strategies to promote interaction as well as practice with holding books and reading aloud. Additionally, the DQSH site offers a helpful listing of books used in programs with brief descriptions - <https://dragqueenstorytime.com/books>.

THEMES

By reviewing dozens of programs and engaging in conversations with librarians and queens, we have attempted to understand what DQS is all about. Throughout the study, we were led by our guiding question: What are queens contributing to community views? From this focus, five primary thematic categories emerged: creativity, diversity, delight, freedom, and pride. They are briefly discussed in the following section - presented in alphabetical order.

Creativity

According to DQSH,

Drag Queen Story Hours capture the imagination and play of the gender fluidity of childhood and gives kids glamorous, positive, and unabashedly queer role models. In spaces like this, kids are able to see people who defy rigid gender restrictions and imagine a world where people can present as they wish, where dress up is real.

These sentiments are reflected in several program descriptions including one hosted in Malmö, Sweden where DQS was offered by the children's culture unit as part of Language Week. The [translated description](#) indicates the program was hosted by "glittery and imaginative drag queens featuring exciting stories, songs, and discussion intended to break norms and boundaries." DQS provides space for imagination, creativity, and play.

Diversity

As described in the previous section, DQS provides opportunities to introduce and extend diverse programming including potential new collaborations and intersectional dialogue. As Sims Bishop's Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors, DQS offer magical views, new possibilities, and essential opportunities to see, hear, and experience diverse realities.

Organizers of the 2018 Rabble Books & Games DQS pictured in Figure 5 note that rainbow families were especially welcome at their events. In August 2019, this progressive group sponsored another DQS featuring [Moesha](#) who read picture books and shared Cook Island Māori traditional dancing.



Figure 5: DQS at Rabble Books & Games, Maylands, Western Australia (via [Facebook](#))

DQSH has also been adapted to offer more effective programming for children with special needs such as autism. Variations such as smaller events, getting titles in advance to review stories, providing seating options, offering multi-sensory experiences, etc. are discussed further in this blog post - <https://www.lineupthebooks.com/dqsh>

Delight

Drag is delightful. It's art that is perfectly queer and queerly perfect. Engaging in this delightful atmosphere provides opportunities for personal growth and enjoyment. According to a contributor to the popular [everymom](#) website who took her daughter into a DQS to get out of the cold in Minneapolis, "drag storytime is actually helping me teach my daughter to be a good person." Two-year Madilyn illustrates the pure delight spawned by drag queens in the photo shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6: Child Sees Drag Queens for First Time at Salt Lake City Pride Parade (via [Twitter](#))

Freedom

“If you have a problem with it, you’re free not to come” - Ellen Richmond , DQS host and bookshop owner in Maine.

As discussed in the introduction, books with LGBTQ content frequently evoke challenges. The ALA OIF has developed a list of resources to support librarians hosting DQS dealing with concerns related to freedom of expression. Kara Yorio also discusses some recent challenges in an article featured in School Library Journal. In the concluding paragraph, she shares the wise perspective of a community media channel from Louisiana, which we echo here:

We believe that providing space for new ideas not only honors the First Amendment of the Constitution and the core values of the United States as a nation of new ideas, but also, that it is the best way to grow as a public and as a community. Public space is the best space for free speech.

That said, it is clear that not all libraries are fully prepared to host DQS. Similar to the program described above in Danville, IL that was originally planned at a public library and then cancelled unexpectedly, Miss Terra Cotta Sugarbaker was dismayed when her program was dropped by the Alpharetta Library Branch in Georgia. Fortunately, in that situation, the mayor stepped up to offer support and a new venue. The mayor described DQS as being about “creativity, self-expression, freedom of speech, and tolerance... hallmarks of the community we want to live in.”



Figure 7: Limited Program Space Often Means DQS Reach Capacity (via [Facebook](#))

Pride

This year, 2019, marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall uprising. According to Harvard scholar Michael Bronski, Stonewall represented “a shocking change of consciousness for the world.” Stonewall led to the formation of numerous LGBTQ groups, efforts, and events - and library collections! The spirit of pride and critical consciousness is manifest in DQS.

In terms of program planning and development, it is logical for librarians to consider offering DQS in tandem with other pride events, often celebrated in June to coincide with the Stonewall anniversary. This was the situation for Hennepin County libraries. This past year, this system in Minnesota hosted six DQS events in conjunction with Pride Month. This programming designed to encourage pride and empathy grew out of efforts by the library's pride workgroup to "create more family-friendly events tied to the monthlong LGBTQIA celebration of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual or allies."

DQS FUTURES

DQSH FAQ poses, "Why do kids love drag queens so much?" and responds, "Children and drag queens have a lot in common. They love to dress up and use their imaginations to create awesome looks and express different sides of themselves. It's no wonder they get along so well!"

In our review of DQS, we observed this magical synergy. Library programs, like texts, embody reflective qualities and have the capacity to serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Additionally, in considering our guiding question, what are queens contributing to community views? the primary themes that emerged (creativity, diversity, delight, freedom, and pride) align well with potential program goals developed by public libraries and other community organizations.

Hosting DQS is an effective way for public libraries to achieve their programming goals. As the IFLA Public Library Manifesto describes, "material must reflect current trends and the evolution of society, as well as the memory of human endeavor and imagination. Collections and services should not be subject to any form of ideological, political or religious censorship, nor commercial pressures." As DQS continues to grow across diverse communities, challenges based on these pressures will continue to emerge - and should be resolved according to approaches developed by librarians in consultation with community members.

In planning DQS, librarians are, in fact, consulting with constituents. For example, a librarian in Virginia noted (via email) that when they first heard of drag queen storytimes, they asked the trans people they knew what they thought of the idea - and received a mixed response. This may be based on potentially harmful confusion around the difference between drag queens and trans people as well as concern based on the wide range of drag performances that have been presented over time (at adult venues), which include misogynistic, transphobic, and racist acts.

Another librarian from Maryland (via email) expressed concerns about DQS becoming more of a performance than a literary experience. That is, "it's not only the anti-drag queen protesters and the concerns from the trans community, but also the issue as to whether or not this is an unintentional de-professionalizing within the library community." Of course, librarians should give careful consideration before inviting any guest readers/performers. This is a critical aspect of offering effective programming.

Based on experience, study, and reflection, we assert that DQS is fun - and much more! As programs that are thoughtfully designed and implemented, they offer tremendous potential to positively affect individuals and communities. As DQSH aptly describes, programs

help children develop empathy, learn about gender diversity and difference, and tap into their own creativity. DQSH can also be life-changing and ultimately life-saving for LGBTQ kids and teens, kids with LGBTQ parents or family members, and anyone who feels different because of their identity or interests or who may not otherwise see themselves reflected in the broader culture.

We are thankful to DQS pioneers for enabling new views and vibrant reflections - and all those who shared their insights and experiences in developing this inquiry.

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