

# Exploring Archives and Allen & Litvinoff's *The Queen*

## A Lesson Plan

What follows is a lesson plan developed around the documentary, *The Queen*, produced by Lewis M. Allen and Si Litvinoff and released in 1968. This lesson plan is meant to promote exploration of the film within its historical context through archival research and engagement with primary sources related to LGBTQ+ histories.

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## Background

*The Queen* has become an important touchpoint in transgender history and the history of drag performance. The film depicts the 1967 Miss All-America Camp Beauty Pageant, a pioneering drag beauty contest held at The Town Hall in New York. Organized by Jack Doroshov, also known as Flawless Sabrina, the pageant featured participants from around the country and a celebrity panel that included Andy Warhol and Edie Sedgwick. New York's underground art community was closely connected to and supportive of the drag scene and it was artist Sven Lukin and cinematographer Frank Simon who approached entertainment lawyer Si Litvinoff with the idea of filming a documentary of the event. In addition to the competition itself, the film captures participants arriving, rehearsing, and getting ready to perform. Conversations among

participants address a range of topics including sexuality, gender affirming surgery, and being drafted into the U.S. army.

In the late 1960s when *The Queen* was released, drag queens were generally assumed to be cisgender gay men as some of the contemporaneous reviews and news articles reflect. However, several participants in the pageant came to identify as trans women, though the term “transgender” was not widely in use at the time of filming.

The film also depicts the racial tensions within the LGBTQ+ community, which are captured explicitly when Crystal LaBeija, a Black participant, confronts the white pageant organizer, Flawless Sabrina, and accuses her of rigging the competition to favor the white participants. In response to the racism she experienced in predominantly white drag pageants, Crystal LaBeija went on to co-found the House of LaBeija and, with the help of others, started the New York ballroom scene. Ballroom culture provides an alternative kinship network and spaces for queer and trans people of color to showcase and celebrate their fullest and most creative selves.

Many people point to *The Queen* as the marker of an important inflection point in LGBTQ+ history. When *The Queen* was released, the Civil Rights and Feminist Movements were going strong and protests in response to the Vietnam war emphasized the spirit of resistance and rebellion. In the year following the film’s release, the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion occurred, which led to a significant increase in organizing around gay rights and the visibility of the movement. The significant contributions of trans people, particularly trans women of color, to early activism and the Stonewall Riots have often been deemphasized or overlooked, but have gained more recognition in recent years. It is useful and important to position *The Queen* within this rich historical context.

The history of drag and the language and identities connected to it are complex and require careful attention to shifting cultural understandings of gender and gender and race-based prejudices. Today, the term “drag queen” is most often used to describe someone who dresses in stereotypically feminine attire and enacts a female persona for the purpose of entertainment. In the 1960s and ‘70s, many performers who identified as women in everyday life were referred to as “Drag Queens” or as “Female Impersonators” because terms like “transgender” were not widely used. Language related to gender identity and performance has evolved significantly since the mid-20th century. When working with historical materials, it is important to try to understand how language is used in a particular time and place and to be respectful of how people identified themselves. Some terms that appear in these materials may be considered offensive by today’s standards, though it is usually best to avoid using a term to describe someone that they did not use to describe themselves.

The items in the [Harry Ransom Center](#) (HRC) collection related to *The Queen* come from the Lewis M. Allen Papers. Lewis Allen was a respected theater and film producer who was responsible for hits such as the theatrical production of *Annie* (1983) and film adaptations of

The Lord of the Flies (1963), and Fahrenheit 451 (1966). Brooke Allen, Allen's daughter, told the Ransom Center that, of all his films, he was most proud of *The Queen*. The negatives for the film were found among Allen's papers, which the HRC used to restore the film, in collaboration with UCLA Film and Television Archive, the Outfest Legacy Project, and Kino Lorber. Other materials include media coverage, correspondence, and items related to the production of the film. You can view the finding aid here: [Lewis M. Allen: An Inventory of His Papers for The Queen \(1968\) at the Harry Ransom Center](#)

In addition to the HRC collections, primary source materials related to *The Queen* and that provide additional historical context come from the [Digital Transgender Archive](#).

## Objectives

The materials and suggested activities gathered here are meant to help engage with *The Queen* and to consider how it depicts drag culture, how it can be understood as a historical text, and how it is connected to dynamic histories of gender, sexuality, and race in the United States.

The primary learning objectives for this lesson plan are:

- Explore gender diversity and its history, particularly the history of drag
- Consider the relationships between gender and race and how people engage with them (separately and together) in different contexts
- Gain familiarity with archives and how to conduct archival research
  - Take critical notice of areas of emphasis and gaps
- Learn how to identify and make use of different kinds of materials
- Engage critically with historical and cultural materials

## Lessons & Activities

The activities suggested below are meant to serve as starting points that can be adapted for different courses and to meet varying learning goals related to writing, research, and historical & cultural analysis.

### Introduction to Archives

The purpose of these activities is to help students gain familiarity with how to conduct archival research and how different repositories function by exploring the Harry Ransom Center Collections and the Digital Transgender Archive.

*Get to know the Harry Ransom Center and the Digital Transgender Archive!*

Steps 1 and 2 can be done in class or as homework after viewing *The Queen*. If completing the activity in class, students may work best in pairs. Step 3 should take place as a full group in class.

The full film is available through the streaming service *Kanopy*. It can also be found on YouTube.

### Step 1: Explore the Archives

(15-20 minutes)

- Go to the Harry Ransom Center (HRC)'s [About page](#) and read the description and their "Mission & Values" statements.
  - Describe the focus and mission of the archives in your own words in 1-2 sentences. What kinds of materials do they collect and why?
- Go to the Digital Transgender Archive (DTA) and read their [Overview page](#).
  - Describe the focus and mission of the archives in your own words in 1-2 sentences. What kinds of materials do they collect and why?
- How are these archives different from each other? In what ways are they similar? (Think about the kinds of materials, goals, and values of each archive)
- What kinds of materials would you look for in each archive?
  - Where do you think you would most likely find letters written by a well-known author?
  - Where do you think you would most likely find photographs of drag performers?

### Step 2: Find Materials

(15-30 minutes)

- Poke around the HRC and the DTA; try running a few searches. Locate one item in each archive that relates in some way to *The Queen* and answer the following questions:  
Item from the HRC (start [here](#) with the Finding Aids or general search bar in the top

right corner):

- Describe the item. What is it? What does it look like? How does it relate to *The Queen*?
- How did you find it? Where did you search? What search terms did you use?
- What information was available to help you find the kind of item you were looking for?
- How can you access this item?
- How might you go about finding other items in the archive related to this one?
- Review the finding aid for the [Lewis M. Allen Papers for \*The Queen\*](#). How might you use this finding aid to locate materials related to *The Queen*?

Item from the DTA (start [here](#)):

- Describe the item. What is it? What does it look like? How does it relate to *The Queen*?
- How did you find it? What search terms did you use?
- What information was available to help you find the kind of item you were looking for?
- How can you access this item?
- How might you go about finding other items in the archive related to this one?

- Review the finding aid for the Lewis M. Allen collection. How might you use this finding aid to locate materials related to *The Queen*?

[Click here](#) for a printable worksheet

### Step 3: In Class Debrief

(15-20 minutes)

- Collect observations and reactions, including insights into the archives and their differences, productive search strategies, frustrations or challenges, etc.
  - Offer suggestions for how to work through challenges or to answer questions
- Discuss the differences between a fully digital archive and an archive with physical holdings and digitized materials
  - What might students do if they want to see something that isn't digitized?
  - What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of in person versus digital archival research?
  - Did any students find the same items on both sites?
- Draw attention to search tools within the archive, such as:
  - Keep track of what you searched to find useful materials
  - Use metadata
    - Pull keywords from descriptions to run new searches
    - Click on linked subject tags
    - View "related items"
    - Take note of thematically related collections and search within them
  - Look for finding aids, subject guides, how to guides, etc.
  - Use filters and advanced search options to narrow or alter a search
- Look at some of the items they found and foster enthusiasm for the materials and the different ways that they connect to the film

## Conducting Research with Primary & Secondary Sources

Through these activities, students will learn about different kinds of sources, including the difference between primary and secondary sources, and their uses. Students should be encouraged to take notice of and engage critically with the challenges they face in trying to find materials related to *The Queen* and LGBTQ+ histories.

### Primary Source Analysis

This activity should be completed in class and combine individual and partner work. (30-40 minutes)

The difference between primary and secondary sources is their proximity to the event or time period you are researching. Primary sources come from that time period and/or are produced by people who were directly involved in the event; they may also refer to the main object of analysis. For example, notes written by the director while he was working on *The Queen* would also be a primary source, because he was directly involved in the film.

Secondary sources provide second-hand information, commentary, or analysis to help you understand the main event or time period. An article written in 2024 that analyzes *The Queen* and provides historical context for it is a secondary source.

Choose one of the following items:

- ["The Queen" Synopsis](#)
- ["Reality Can Be a Drag" New York Magazine Review](#)
- [Australian censorship board letter to John Maxtone-Graham](#) with [envelope](#)
- [Letter about success at Cannes Film Festival](#)
- [Producer Blurbs about Rachel Harlow and Crystal LaBeija](#)
- [Handwritten text by Rachel Harlow](#) (pages 1-5)
- [Photograph of Crystal LaBeija and Marlow Dickson](#)  
(Marlow Dickson completed as "Miss Alfonso" from Chicago)
- [Lewis Allen's Producer Bio](#)
- [Advertisement for Re-release](#)

Fill out the Guide to [Primary Source Analysis](#) and the questions below:

- How does this item relate to the film, *The Queen*?
- What questions about the film does this item raise for you?
- What kinds of information might be useful to better understand this item and how it relates to the film?
  - What kinds of secondary sources might you look for to better understand your item and the film?

Share responses to the questions listed above with the class

Research Project

This activity is designed to be scalable as an in-class exploration, homework assignment, or longer-term paper assignment.

Read: ["All hail The Queen! An interview with drag historian Joe E. Jeffreys."](#) *Ransom Center Magazine*. 26 June 2020.

Consider one of the following topics that comes up in or connects to *The Queen*.

- LGBTQ+ people in the military
- Racism in the LGBTQ+ community
- Drag and "Female Impersonators" in the U.S. and Europe
- Anti-LGBTQ legislation
- Depictions of drag in film
- Transgender history in the U.S.
- Pageants and gender "norms"
- Balls, houses, and ballroom culture
- Topic of your choosing (with approval)

1. Locate at least one scene in the film that connects to this topic. What can you learn about it from the film? What would you like to know that does not come up in the film?
2. Locate at least two primary sources from the Ransom Center and/or the DTA that relate to your topic.
  - a. Consider: What kinds of terms might you search? How do your results differ searching in the Ransom Center compared to the DTA? What do they tell you about this topic?
  - b. What can you learn about your topic from these sources? How is that information similar to or different from how it's addressed in *The Queen*?
3. Generate a research question about your topic. What do you want to know about your topic? How might you broaden your search beyond these three sources (the film and the two sources you found)? What kinds of additional information might you need?
4. Find at least two secondary sources about your topic.
  - a. For each source, consider: Where was the source published or where did it circulate? Who wrote or created it and when? What kinds of information does this source provide?
  - b. What do the sources tell you about this topic? How is this information related to or different from what you learned from your three initial sources?
  - c. Take note of where you are looking for sources and where you are finding relevant and useful materials.
  - d. What kinds of challenges are you facing? How are you working through them?
5. Write a paragraph about your topic based on what you learned.

Students may continue conducting research to develop a thesis and write a paper about their topic using *The Queen* as a source or object of analysis.

## For Further Exploration

### On Language

- The Digital Transgender Archive's "[Describing Objects](#)" policy
- [GLAAD's Glossary of Terms: Transgender](#)
- [DTA Glossary](#)

### On LGBTQ+ Histories

- [LGB and/or T History](#)
- [Researching BIPOC Trans Histories: A Historical Research Guide](#)

### Recommended Viewing

- *The Queen* [Re-release trailer](#)
- Jenny Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990)
- Dominique Luster, "[Archives Have the Power to Boost Marginalized Voices](#)"

## Recommended Reading

- "All hail The Queen! An interview with drag historian Joe E. Jeffreys." *Ransom Center Magazine*. 26 June 2020.  
<https://sites.utexas.edu/ransomcentermagazine/2020/06/26/all-hail-the-queen-an-interview-with-drag-historian-joe-e-jeffreys/>
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<https://www2.archivists.org/history/leaders/randall-c-jimerson/embracing-the-power-of-archives>
- Koskovich, Gerard. "The History of Queer History: One Hundred Years of the Search for Shared Heritage." *LGBTQ America: A Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History*, National Park Foundation, 2016.  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20250203083606/https://www.nps.gov/subjects/lgbtqheritage/upload/lgbtqtheme-heritage.pdf>
- Wilson, Steve. "The Queen" *Ransom Center Magazine*. 8 June 2020.  
<https://sites.utexas.edu/ransomcentermagazine/2020/06/08/the-queen/>

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