

QUEER UTOPIAN PERFORMANCE AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

A Thesis

by

DANA NICOLE SAYRE

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2012

Major Subject: Performance Studies

Queer Utopian Performance at Texas A&M University

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Judith Hamera
Committee Members,	Kirsten Pullen
	Joseph O. Jewell
Head of Department,	Judith Hamera

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ABSTRACT

Queer Utopian Performance at Texas A&M University. (May 2012)

Dana Nicole Sayre, B.A.; B.A, Fairmont State University

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Judith Hamera

Through a combination of personal interviews and participant-observation in three field sites – the Tim Miller workshop and performance of October 2010 and the student organizations Cepheid Variable and the GLBT Aggies – I argue that manifestations of utopian desire and performance circulate within and among marginalized groups on the Texas A&M University campus, undermining the heteronormative and monolithic utopia the university attempts to present. I participated in each night of rehearsal during the Tim Miller workshop, as well as the creation and performance of my own solo autobiographical monologue as a part of the ensemble. My participant-observation in Cepheid Variable and the GLBT Aggies was concurrent, consisting of attendance at both weekly organizational meetings and outside events sponsored by the organizations over two years.

I argue that the Tim Miller workshop and performance is best understood by examining the intersection of queer intimacy, utopia, and performance. I argue that processes of connection, sharing, and mutual transformation allowed it to function as an example of queer utopian performance *qua* performance at Texas A&M.

I explore the links between the “nerd,” “queer,” and “family” identities of Cepheid Variable, arguing that the intersection of these identity-markers and the performance practices which reinforce them enable Cepheid Variable to create a utopian space on the Texas A&M campus for those students who do not fit traditional notions of Aggie identity. I explore two Cepheid performance practices: noise-making and storytelling, arguing that they construct, support, and interweave each element of Cepheid identity, allowing the organization to perpetuate and reaffirm its utopian and counterpublic statuses at Texas A&M.

I explore what the GLBT Aggies claims to provide in theory, juxtaposed with what it actually accomplishes in practice. I examine a moment of crisis the LGBTQ community at Texas A&M faced in spring 2011. I argue that the utopia the GLBTA promises remains unfulfilled because the marginalization of the LGBTQ community at large leaves diversity *within* that community unaddressed.

I conclude that utopian communities persist if able to adapt, and that the strength of the *intimacy* built into queer utopias in particular sustains them through time.

DEDICATION

Anyanka: “You trusting fool. How do you know the other world is any better than this?”

Giles: “Because it has to be.”

– *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, “The Wish”

To anyone who has ever felt the here and now was not enough, and who has fought to bring a world of their hope, desire, and imagination into being. This is for you; don't ever stop trying.

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The list of individuals to which I owe my gratitude for the completion of this thesis project is great, and if I miss anyone I ought to have singled out by name, I apologize.

I will start at the beginning with my mother, who read me stories every night of my childhood, maxed out both her and my father's library cards every summer until I was old enough to get my own so that my sister and I had mountains of good books to read, and who served as my forensics coach in high school when none of the English teachers would. I know that her actions inspired the deep love I have felt for stories and storytelling from as far back as I can remember, and it was that love which ultimately brought me to Texas A&M University. I must also thank my sister, Lisa, who let me play teacher growing up even though I was two-and-a-half years younger than she was, and who proofread every paper I wrote in high school and college, helping to shape me into the writer I am today. I also want to thank my Grandma Julie, may she rest in peace, for reminding me to stop and smell the roses, for always being proud of me for staying in school, and for never caring how much homework I did when we came to visit her.

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was my first introduction to activism. I also want to thank Mr. O'Connell, the man who first showed me that history isn't boring at all; the way some people write textbooks is.

I owe an immense debt of gratitude to Dr. John O'Connor, Dr. Francene Kirk, Jeffrey Ingman, and Troy Snyder for providing me a foundational education as a theatre practitioner, and for molding me not only as an actor and a scholar, but as a human being. Thank you for casting me in roles you knew would challenge me, and for providing me both opportunities and funding so that I could continue to grow and learn beyond the classroom. I also know I put you all through Hell and more after I was outed to my parents, and I won't ever forget that you never gave up on me, even when I almost did. I also want to thank you for all the letters of recommendation I had you write to get me into graduate school, and for finding the program at Texas A&M and thinking of me. I want to thank Fran especially for introducing me to ethnography, and for teaching me the importance of telling the stories of whatever community in which I find myself.

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I of course owe many thanks to the Department of Performance Studies at Texas A&M University for choosing to accept me into the first class of their Master of Arts program. Thank you for all of your support and guidance and for teaching me the history

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NOMENCLATURE

line break	Slight pause in speech
...	Two second pause in speech
[...]	Part of interview has been edited out
[]	Second person interjects during first person's "turn" OR a vocalization or sound which is not a word (<u>ex</u> : inhales, coughs)
/[]/	Overlapped speech
<i>italics</i>	Emphasized word
↑	Vocal inflection up (when not at the end of asking a question)
↓	Vocal inflection down
“ ”	The person speaking is voicing another individual's speech
hahaha	Laughter – the number of 'ha's' indicates the duration
[laughs]	When laughter occurs in the midst of/underneath speech
extra letters	(<u>ex</u> : yeaahh) The syllable/vowel/word is elongated – the number of repetitions of a letter indicates the duration
changed spelling	(<u>ex</u> : “ta” instead of “to”) indicates how the word was pronounced

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INTRODUCTION

What drives the desires which fuel utopian longing, and how are *queer* utopias formed? Can a utopian community exist in the present moment? Is utopian performance relegated to the field of theatrical performance? How might the performance of utopian desire extend into the practices everyday life? In what ways is the conservative and heteronormative culture of Texas A&M University a prime location for an analysis of queer utopian performance? These are among the questions this project attempts to answer. Through a combination of personal interviews and participant-observation in three field sites – the Tim Miller workshop and performance of October 2010 and the student organizations Cepheid Variable and the GLBT Aggies – I argue that manifestations of utopian desire and performance circulate within and among marginalized groups on the Texas A&M University campus, undermining the heteronormative and monolithic utopia the university attempts to present.

Texas A&M University

In thinking about my own relationship to the Aggie experience, I am reminded of an expression many Aggies quote: “From the outside looking in you can’t understand it; from the inside looking out you can’t explain it” (Ley). This saying illuminates both the utopian potential located within Texas A&M University culture and the mechanism

This thesis follows the style of *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)*.

through which that utopia is able to persist – *tradition*. Aggie traditions are meant to interpellate new students into the utopia the university promises, and participation in them is marked as something outsiders are unable to understand. From the moment of acceptance into the university, incoming students at Texas A&M are educated about – and expected to immediately embrace – an “Aggie” identity, a life-time membership in the “Aggie family,” and the responsibility of upholding the long lineage of beliefs and practices the institution has claimed as its own. “All of the traditions of the corps and the rest of the student body make up what Aggies call ‘the Other Education,’ the training intended to make them moral, ethical people” (Hallett). This “Other Education” includes adherence to the Aggie Honor Code and Aggie Core Values as well as participation in traditional events such as Midnight Yell or Silver Taps.¹ The emphasis placed on this “Other Education” at Texas A&M seems, at least rhetorically, though often in practice, to mark it with equal importance to the education Aggies receive inside the classroom during their college experience.

If taken at face value, any importance placed on the idea of “tradition” itself would seem to be value neutral. Certainly, any number of familial or cultural traditions can be understood to contribute to the development of a seemingly stable identity or to provide comfort in times of emotional or physical distress. But it is important to consider that Texas A&M is almost notorious for its conservative history; females were first legally allowed in 1963, followed by racial integration in 1964, and participation in the Corps of Cadets became optional in 1965 (Ferrell). The exclusion of the “other” at Texas A&M to which this history points has continued into 2012 with students belonging to

racial, sexual, and religious minorities often reporting feelings of marginalization, discrimination, and harassment on campus. This makes it important to question which *kinds* of students A&M's focus on tradition over change might benefit the most. The ideology sustaining the Aggie identity at Texas A&M University seems to be pulling its students in two directions. On the one hand, Aggies are supposed to be loyal, respectful, and friendly, forming a family based on a set of shared experiences and traditions. On the other hand, the rural roots of many Aggies and their dependence on the past limit their ability to accept those who act and look a little bit differently.

Additionally, any attempt to explore the possibility of resistance to the norm at Texas A&M is further complicated by the fact that many students who do not conform to traditional notions of Aggie identity still find value in the campus culture itself, and want the A&M experience to actually live up to the potential it promises. One of my interlocutors, Dre, noted:

most
 people when they think of what is a typical student at A&M they think ↑
white, conservative,
Christian,
 very plain,
 traditional interests
 [...]
 I'm *black*
gay
 liberal
 my interests tend to be a little bit on the
 you know
 ↑ *out*-there
 [...]
 and
 ...
 I wanna be part of the Aggie family as well ↑. (22 Sept. 2011)²

This desire to expand the definition of Aggie identity to incorporate a larger range of experiences, identities, and ideologies can be read as a form of resistance against the hegemonic power structures of Texas A&M, however limited. Dre recognizes that Texas A&M has constituted its mission and reputation in a particular manner, and that he lacks many traditional markers of Aggie identity. Yet, despite his difference from the Aggie ideal, Dre was still drawn to attend A&M *because* of its value system, believing that the utopia the university posits is something worth working towards, whether or not it is – or even can be – achieved in practice. Dre’s comments gesture toward a notion that more liberal modes of thought and behavior are not antithetical to the world-building project of Texas A&M University as it stands, and Dre defends his right to break the mold provided in his own attempts to bring that world to life.

It is precisely this tension between what Texas A&M University *is* and, not only what it *was* in the past, but what it *could be* or *should be* in both the present and future which point to the usefulness of examining the experiences of Texas A&M students through a utopian lens. The conservative underpinnings of the tradition mobilized at Texas A&M often prevent the university from fulfilling its promise to provide a family for *all* Aggies who enter its doors. Additionally, the queering of the Aggie ethos itself to which Dre alludes when he says that he still wants to be a part of the Aggie family despite being black, gay, and liberal, caused me to consider how the construction of *queer* utopias in particular might function at Texas A&M. Adherence to values like loyalty, integrity, and respect have the potential to be mobilized in ways not tied to politically conservative points of view or the structures of heteronormativity. It is in

those moments where Texas A&M students attempt to make the campus climate of the university more inclusive and strive to create an Aggie identity which lives up to its moral potential that the construction of queer utopian spaces can be found, and that is where I choose to place my focus.

Project Outline

I posit each of my field sites as a utopia for at least some portion of its membership, and I understand each as attempting to create a better world, if only in the present moment, for the community it proposes to serve. My analysis of utopia is influenced by the works of Jill Dolan and Jose Estéban Muñoz. Like Dolan and Muñoz, I will posit the performance of utopia as an act of futurity, and like Muñoz, I will mark the need for a “there and then” different from the “here and now” as a specifically *queer* impulse. In his work, Muñoz asserts that the present “is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and ‘rational’ expectations” (27). In a heteronormative world, queers are denied both a past and a future, making the construction of utopian community a necessary part of queer culture’s very survival. Muñoz asserts that the queer and the utopian cannot be untwined from one another, and this intersection can be witnessed through the needs served by each of my field sites. For the purposes of my analysis, however, queerness is not limited to individuals who self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ). In *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, Alexander Doty argues that queerness should provide “a space of sexual

instability that already queer positioned viewers can connect with in various ways, and within which straights might be likely to recognize and express their queer impulses”

(8). I will approach the analysis of queer utopia itself with a similar sense of instability in mind, exploring the value the expression of queer impulses and desires can hold for even straight-identifying individuals at A&M.

Dolan, expanding J.L. Austin’s theory of linguistic performativity, establishes the existence of a *utopian performative*, defining it as an expression of “the sense of possibility for something never before seen but only longed for, that glimpse of the no-place we can reach only through *feeling*, together” (65-6 – emphasis original). Here, Dolan posits utopia as a process and a daydream; it is the change we hope for in the world but which is often not quite realized, and which functions most beneficially in the affective realms of human experience. In my analysis, I will analyze both moments of utopian performance and utopian performativity. Dolan argues that utopian performatives are:

...small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense....Utopian performatives, in their doings, make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better. (5-6)

In addition to utopian performatives, which create an affective vision of a better future that may not exceed the moment of their creation, I have encountered moments of utopian performance at Texas A&M where individuals are able, if only temporarily, to actually live out some facet of the better world which they imagine.

Ethnographic Methods

I include the Tim Miller workshop and its resulting performance of “Broken is Better: 23 Aggies Can’t be Wrong” to theorize the impact of one short, concentrated utopian performance as compared to an array of utopian performances experienced by students over several years of participation within a student organization, and which are also tied to an even larger organizational history.³ The workshop will also provide an example of performance *qua* performance, specifically organized, directed, and performed by performance studies scholars and artists. By contrasting staged performance with performances of everyday life, I hope to illuminate the connections between formal and informal expressions of utopian desire at Texas A&M and interrogate the possibility that Dolan’s utopian performative might exist beyond explicitly theatrical spaces. An investigation of the GLBT Aggies will facilitate exploration of the ways in which openly gay students continue to fight to claim an Aggie identity as well as a queer one, and will allow for the interrogation of a queer utopia created explicitly by and for those of non-normative sexual orientations. Cepheid Variable, while not necessarily intended for LGBTQ students, has long been the admitted home of nerds, geeks, and weirdos on the Texas A&M campus, and an analysis of its group dynamics enables examination of the potential of queer utopian performance beyond the realm of LGBTQ identity itself.

In my analysis of each field site, I will highlight a set of key words which point to the most salient themes manifesting themselves during my participant-observation. The key words which link my sites are: “queer intimacy,” “utopia,” “performance,”

“family,” and “counterpublic” identity. While each term might not be explored in every chapter, I do engage each site as a unique manifestation of queer utopia at Texas A&M. I have chosen to analyze each field site in a separate case study to allow the unique relationship dynamics of each community to shine through and to reaffirm both the multiplicity of desires which can fuel utopian longing and the diversity of communities which can be inspired by utopian impulses. While I discovered a noteworthy amount of overlap between the memberships of Cepheid Variable and the GLBT Aggies, a closer examination of the intersectionality of LGBTQ and nerd/geek identities is beyond the scope of this research project.

This project represents two years of fieldwork in three sites, with concurrent participant-observation in Cepheid Variable and the GLBT Aggies. As a participant-observer in the Tim Miller workshop and performance, my ethnographic involvement included participation in each night of rehearsal during the week of the workshop, as well as the creation and performance of my own solo autobiographical monologue as a part of the workshop ensemble. Additionally, I conducted interviews with several workshop participants in the weeks and months following the workshop experience itself, and remain a member of the Facebook group created to both commemorate the workshop experience and allow its participants to remain in contact. In the cases of Cepheid Variable and the GLBT Aggies, I attended both weekly organizational meetings and outside events sponsored by the organizations over three semesters (fall 2010, spring 2011 and fall 2011), including many of the dinners which followed the weekly meetings for both organizations. I also spent time interacting with members in the “safe spaces”

both organizations have carved out for their membership on the Texas A&M university campus – Studio 12 for Cepheid Variable and the GLBT Resource Center for the GLBT Aggies. These instances of less formalized interaction facilitated deeper bonding and relationship-building with the membership of both organizations, as well as providing insight as to which of the most active and passionate members it would be prudent to interview.

My interview transcription process was inspired and informed by D. Soyini Madison's description of poetic transcription in *Critical Ethnography*. Madison writes,

In poetic transcription, words are not in isolation from the movement, sound, and sensory dimensions that enrich their substance. Words are placed on a page in poetic form to include these performative dimensions of the speaker. The narrative event is a *gestalt*; therefore, in documentation, the intent is to represent as authentically as possible its range of meanings....*how* something is said along with *what* is said. (207-8 – emphasis original)

In my own transcription process, I have attempted to incorporate as much of the *how* as is possible, in addition to the literal *what* my interlocutors have said. It is my hope that the inclusion of markers of emphasis, pronunciation, pitch, and tempo in the interview quotes cited will allow the reader to engage performatively with the interview process itself, and develop deeper insights into the positions of those who have shared their experiences here.

The decision to engage in poetic transcription was also influenced by Leonard Clyde Hawes' assertion that "common sense is hegemony's material manifestation at the micropractical level" (38). Hawes argues that the often overlooked micropractices of conversation can actually be keys to unlock the power structures which shape the way

we think, act, and speak to one another. Detailed transcription becomes important in this formulation because:

As the conversational discourse is transcribed into sequences of sounds and silences in the process of representing them as textual bits and pieces, identity becomes decoded and deterritorialized as well. How participants imagined themselves, their interlocutor, and their understanding of agency and choice (i.e., what is taking place as a product of their choices and how it is happening) becomes increasingly problematic.” (42)

Poetic transcription process allowed me to better represent the words of my interlocutors as they were performed to me, and to process the meaning of those words in a deeper way: to consider the word choice, pauses, and arguments of my interlocutors in a way I could not have during the initial conversation itself. It is my hope that some portion of the intensity of that experience will be transferred to the reader. The interview transcript key can be located in the nomenclature section of this document.

In the chapters that follow, I will explore the queer utopias created at Texas A&M University through case studies which analyze the Tim Miller workshop and performance, Cepheid Variable, and the GLBT Aggies. In conclusion, I return to the quote: “From the outside looking in you can't understand it; from the inside looking out you can't explain it” (Ley). It is my hope that my position as a participant-observer within these three field sites will allow this project to look at Texas A&M University simultaneously from the outside and the inside, allowing some portion of the dynamics informing the Aggie experience to be both better understood by and explained to those on both sides of the equation.

Notes

¹ The Aggie Honor Code states: “An Aggie does not lie, cheat, or steal, or tolerate those who do” (<http://student-rules.tamu.edu/aggiecode>). Texas A&M University’s proposes to achieve its purpose statement – “To develop leaders of character dedicated to serving the greater good.” – by its students, faculty, and staff adhering to six Aggie Core Values: Excellence, Integrity, Leadership, Loyalty, Respect, and Selfless Service (<http://www.tamu.edu/about/coreValues.html>). Midnight Yell is a tradition “held the night before a home game in Kyle Field...yell leaders lead the Fightin' Texas Aggie Band and the Twelfth Man into the stadium. The yell leaders lead the crowd in old army yells, the singing of the fight song, and tell fables of how the Aggies are going to beat the everlivin' hell out of our opponent for the next day. Lastly, the lights go out, and Aggies kiss their dates....The purpose of Midnight Yell is to pump up the Twelfth Man for the next day's big game!” (<http://aggietraditions.tamu.edu/team/midnight.html>). Silver Taps is one of the traditions related to the Texas A&M Corps of Cadets (a full-time program leading to commissions in all branches of military service) and “is held for a graduate or undergraduate student who passes away while enrolled at A&M. This final tribute is held the first Tuesday of the month when a student has passed away the previous month.” (<http://aggietraditions.tamu.edu/remember/silvertaps.html>)

² The interview transcription key can be located in the nomenclature.

³ I realize Tim Miller repeats this workshop at dozens of universities across the United States and that even this site can be understood to have a connection to a larger history of performance and utopian longing as a result. I would argue, however, that the Texas A&M students who participated in Miller’s workshop were not given access to this lineage of performance in the way that the histories of Cepheid Variable and the GLBT Aggies are passed down to new generations of the membership.

TIM MILLER WORKSHOP AND PERFORMANCE

While all utopias are constrained by temporality, the queer utopia created within the Tim Miller workshop and performance, formed within the confines of a bounded experience, is the most temporary of those I examine. The Department of Performance Studies at Texas A&M University hosted gay performance artist Tim Miller in October 2010. He was brought to the university to perform *Glory Box* and host a week-long workshop on solo autobiographical performance with undergraduate and graduate students. The goal of the workshop was for Miller to provide a model for the creation of solo performance pieces, for the participants to work through the process with him as a group to create their own short monologues, and for those monologues to then be fashioned into an evening of performance for the larger Texas A&M community. I argue that this was accomplished, and that the process is best understood by examining the intersection of queer intimacy, utopia, and performance. I will interrogate the afterlife which follows especially heightened performative moments, with a focus on “potentiality” and “ephemera” (Muñoz), and explore the limitations and benefits of the autobiographical performance genre itself. The self-contained nature of the workshop experience is reflected in the lack of subject headings in this chapter.

A total of twenty-three students participated in the workshop, and the ensemble piece we developed was entitled “Broken is Better: 23 Aggies Can’t be Wrong.” A majority of the student participants were affiliated with Performance Studies and had varying levels of experience with either solo performance or the creation of

autobiographical monologues. During the week of the workshop, Miller took the participants through a series of exercises meant to build community and allow the actors to tap into a meaningful, emotionally charged moment of life experience, shaping a narrative around it. The first evening, we all stood in a circle, eyes closed, holding hands, and said a sentence or two about something which had been on our minds or in our hearts that day, whether good or bad, exciting or painful, life-changing or seemingly insignificant. In later rehearsals, we were told to think of a moment when we said “yes!” or “no!” to something or someone, to draw an expressive map of our bodies and our relationship to and perception of different parts of our physical selves (ex: I was always told I had two left feet, my head is in the clouds, my hands are always reaching out to touch someone, etc), or to just write for five minutes without stopping and see what came out of it.

By the time the evening of the performance came around, several themes emerged which connected the performance pieces to one another: struggles with religion, sexuality, or racial prejudice; overcoming physical and mental limitations; remembering and honoring loss; moving on to something new; and perhaps most importantly, coming to accept and love yourself, broken parts and all. Every piece down to a person was deep, insightful, moving, and seemingly tapped into one of the central struggles of humanity. Part of that depth was built into the exercises themselves—Tim continually pressed us to tell the story we *needed* to tell that week, and tapping into that level of desire was bound to bring up issues which will resonate with a multitude of audience and ensemble members. Also, the deeper one person dug into his/her emotional

history, the more it would drive the rest of us to go out on the ledge with them.

Additionally, many of the participants in this workshop experience were coming from performance or theatre backgrounds, and were therefore equipped with knowledge of genre, themes, and dramatic structures, which aided in the construction and development of a strong narrative and emotional through-line in any given monologue.

Despite the background and positionality of the students involved, one of the things that I heard several times from numerous participants was that they decided to take part in the workshop basically because one or several of their professors mentioned that it was a big deal for the department to have brought in this famous performance artist, and that it was an educational opportunity which should not be overlooked or passed up lightly. So while the desire to learn how to create a solo performance piece was potentially there, and a love of performance itself was likely present as well, I was struck by the sense of *duty* which brought many participants into the room the first day. Texas A&M University has a reputation for its devotion to tradition, and a sense of duty to one's fellow Aggies is certainly a part of the development of an Aggie identity—a process which begins the moment a Freshman first steps foot on the campus. The portion of the Texas A&M University website dedicated to Aggie Traditions states that a “spirit of readiness for service, desire to support, and enthusiasm” are important parts of what it means to be an Aggie.¹ In addition, Texas A&M has identified six Core Values which exemplify the mind-set of the university and its constituents including excellence, leadership, and selfless service.² In an environment such as this, it is no surprise that students would feel an obligation to serve their department well, devoting time, energy,

and talents to whatever ends professors and administrators deemed worthy of such an investment. It is also important to note that because Texas A&M has such a conservative campus climate, students in Performance Studies feel an extra sense of duty to the department itself, recognizing how vital it is to raise visibility and produce good work at a university where the arts are not as widely recognized as, say, science or engineering.

Yet, despite A&M's focus on duty and service, and regardless of whatever motivations might have brought any of us into the room that first night of the workshop, once we were there together sharing stories about ourselves we might have never told anyone before or even said out loud, the workshop experience morphed into something very different. Katie, a workshop participant, recalled:

I think↑ that the exercises in the ↑first few days
 ...
 were sort of to break us down and get us on the same level↑
 ...
 so that we could *build* from there
 to create the piece
 [...]
 It took somebody
 who
 knew nothing about *us*↑
 to be able to ask us questions
 ...
 And to
 make us think of
 think of the things we never thought about each other↑
 and about ourselves↑
 so that we↑
 ...
 we were learning something new about every per↑son
 ...
 rather than just like
 coming here with my friends to meet these other people
 It was coming here as *myself*

and getting to know *all* these people
 whether they be
 friends
 or classmates
 or complete strangers. (22 Nov. 2010)³

The relationship-building practices of the workshop and their effects on its participants, as Katie describes them here, seem reminiscent of what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner label *queer intimacy*, which includes “a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation” (558). Precisely because some of the workshop participants were likely to have previous relationships with one another, it was necessary for each participant to relate intimate details of his/her life with which *no one* in the room would be familiar, thereby creating a unique affective bond between the twenty-three of us and Miller, the workshop leader. Within that context, the workshop participants could develop “a common language of self-cultivation, shared knowledge, and the exchange of inwardness,” which could then be shared with the audience on the night of the performance, hopefully inspiring the spectators to consider their own broken places and what a community of shared humanity might look like outside of a theatrical performance space (Berlant and Warner 561).

In “Preaching to the Converted,” Tim Miller and David Román note that “solo performance is either understood as someone preaching or someone confessing...the best autobiographical solo pieces are windows into a world that is both my own and not my own” (185). Katie seems to be alluding to a similar feeling of double-ness in the *creation* as well as the performance of a solo autobiographical performance piece.

During the workshop experience itself, the participants were also audience members for each other, witnessing several stories from each participant – all but one of which the audience who came to the final, public performance would never be aware. The workshop exercises were designed to provide a space for the participants to connect to one another, and by the end of the week we were all dedicated to listening to and supporting one another, as well as deciding what it was we had to say – both individually and collectively. Present in the workshop was the desire “to reach for something better, for new ideas about how to be and how to be with each other to articulate a common, different future” (Dolan 36). Witnessing the struggles each of the participants had faced, we yearned for a context in which such pain would never have to occur, or at least a world in which our broken bits could be better honored, shared, and used as a force to inspire change around us.

Katie’s comments also highlight the fact that during the week of the workshop, each participant had to negotiate the boundaries of “this is my friend, yet *not* my friend because I never knew that about them before” or “that’s my experience, but it’s *not* my experience because someone else is telling their story yet I’ve felt the same way.” This kind of subjectivity can be related to Richard Schechner’s distinction between “not me” and “not not me” in performance practice, and especially in the workshop-rehearsal portion of the process (110). Schechner argues that “during workshop-rehearsals performers play with words, things, and actions, some of which are ‘me’ and some ‘not me,’” but that “by the end of the process, the ‘dance goes into the body,’” with any “me-ness” being transformed into “not not me-ness” by the fact of its now being incorporated

into the performance repertoire of a particular production (110). In the case of the Miller workshop experience, however, this distinction might be more usefully framed as “not like me” but “not not like me,” as each participant attempted to understand his/her relationship to every other participant as they worked together to construct a cohesive ensemble piece.

In *Utopia in Performance*, Jill Dolan states that she chose to analyze performances which were able to “work their captivating magic through the power of the performers’ presence, not to insist on authentic experience, or essential humanity, or premodern primitivism, but to see, for a moment, how we might engage one another’s differences, and our mutual human-ness, constructed as it is in these brief moments together” (31). The performances which developed out of the Miller workshop experience were, I believe, motivated by and exhibited that same type of experience. We, as workshop participants, knew there was a limited amount of time to choose a story and develop a narrative surrounding it. Because of this, our experience together became less about choosing the “right” story or writing the “most profound” monologue anyone had ever heard, and more about the attempt to create something which was meaningful to us at that given moment, and the willingness to focus our attention on each participant in his/her own struggle to connect, be heard, and share a little part of themselves on the stage.

One of the most moving performance pieces for me personally was that of an undergraduate Community Health major named Eric, who used his time on the stage to wrestle with his experience as a gay man in a fraternity in the middle of conservative

Texas. In an interview, Eric related a story about how his performance impacted one fraternity brother in a particularly meaningful way, saying:

when I was going through this ti-Tim Miller experience
 ...
 uh
 he pulled me aside↑
 and he said
 “Eric
 I wanna *thank* you
 because be↑fore this
 I really didn’t care about gays
 like
 you know I talked crap about↑ them
 and ↑now I’ve realized that you *are* human
 ...
 and
 I understand”
 ...
 and um
 ↑every time I get an opportunity
 ta
 talk about sexu↑ality in the classroom
 and to help other people understand that
 yes
 we *are* human
 just like you there’s no
difference between↑ heterosexuals and homosexuals
 ...
 I ↑feel like
 they’re going away to be more
 ↑open-minded and more
 emba-uh
 to embrace the experience of it. (30 Nov. 2010)

The forcefulness of Eric’s presence and vulnerability on the stage and the immediacy of his message about acceptance (the workshop happened to coincide with both the Texas A&M University GLBT Resource Center’s Coming Out Week programming and the week several gay teen suicides had been in the national news) were able to move a

homophobic young man to reconsider his opinion of and position relating to homosexuality – not a small feat in a culture as conservative as College Station, Texas. In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz writes that utopia is “a moment when the here and now is transcended by a *then* and a *there* that could be and indeed should be” (97 – emphasis original). Seen in this light, Eric’s monologue could be understood simultaneously as a call for a future when being gay and being in a fraternity would not have to be at odds with one another and the construction of a past in which that world already exists. Eric’s desire for change and his call to the audience for action and acceptance invite everyone witnessing the event to share in his utopian vision, bringing Muñoz’s “horizon of possibility” that much closer to reality and the here and now (97).

Several times during our interview, Eric highlighted the importance of connecting with others as a *human being*, arguing that education which appeals to or recognizes a common humanity between individuals who might disagree ideologically about certain issues will be more effective than a more logical and distant approach. Certainly, Eric’s own passion was able to impact at least one young man in a positive way, creating a literal change of heart. But at the same time, Eric’s recollection of his fraternity brother’s response provides evidence of just how much work still needs to be done at Texas A&M University with regard to queer visibility and acceptance. Taking Eric’s account of the encounter at face value, it would seem that before his attendance at this theatrical event, the young man in question would never have considered a gay man (and by extension, any/all LGBTQ individuals) to even be *human*, let alone an equal or a friend. This moment of interaction highlights the homophobia, ignorance, and hatred

running rampant on the Texas A&M University campus as well as the power performance holds to work affectively in filling those gaps. Dolan notes that the utopian performative can provide “an example of what it might feel like to regard friends and lovers, strangers and those most different from ourselves with respectful, intersubjective consideration and thoughtfulness” (71). Though his response illuminates larger structural issues facing the queer segment of Texas A&M’s campus population, Eric’s fraternity brother was able to experience a moment of reflection akin to that which Dolan proposes, reinforcing the value of exposure to alternative points of view – an experience the majority of students at Texas A&M often lack.

It will also be helpful to consider that it was not only the audience who was impacted by Eric’s passionate plea for acceptance in order to illustrate the range of reactions a single performative moment is able to inspire. Up until the night before the performance, I was planning to perform a monologue based around the body map exercise and my larger-than-average-sized feet. But inspired by the bravery of my fellow workshop participants – especially those who wrote queer pieces, including both Eric and Andrew – I chose instead to write a new piece, one chronicling my own difficult coming out experience and a resulting suicide attempt for which I was hospitalized the summer before my junior year of college. I was only able to decide to tell the story I did because I knew the other workshop participants would all be, both literally and figuratively, standing behind me the entire time. Miller, likely because of his own background as a queer performance artist, encouraged the development of this new

piece, even though he had told the ensemble at rehearsal that whatever piece we performed that night would be our piece at the performance the next evening.

In their work, Miller and Román note the intensity such queer performances can hold for both performer and audience, arguing that:

For queer people, the act of being witnessed is inevitably both sacred (i.e. transformational) and performative. From the ritual and theatrical life-action of “coming out” to the urgent necessity of telling the tale of who we are, the lesbian and gay experience is often chartered by a set of initiations and gestures that are designed to be participated in and witnessed. (180)

Perhaps within this sense of urgency and necessity which Miller and Román illuminate in queer performance, we can find a reason why the Tim Miller workshop experience would be of lasting importance for some individuals who participated in it. For those of us who uncovered stories of intense pain or grief, stories which before the moment they were revealed to the group might have been known to no one, the workshop experience was extremely cathartic, functioning almost like a group therapy session.

Certainly, however, it is important to recognize the limits of both performance and utopian desire in this situation. Fifty-thousand odd students are in attendance at Texas A&M University, and the theatre in which the one-night-only workshop performance was held, though practically full, could only seat several hundred. It is also fair to assume that a majority of the audience was made up of classmates, friends, and family of the twenty-three participants as well as the faculty, staff, and students of the Department of Performance Studies – individuals likely to be more liberal than the cultural norm of Texas A&M and more predisposed to view the performance in a positive light. It is accurate to say we must be careful not to over-emphasize the

transformative potential of performance, and particularly autobiographical performances such as the one in question here. Indeed, to some, Eric's point of view about education might appear naïve, and some queer theorists would certainly argue that the ideological differences separating heteronormativity from more queer ways of living in the world are too great to be solved by one (or even three, counting mine and Andrew's) two-minute monologue during one evening of theatrical performance. And they wouldn't necessarily be wrong.

Yet, Dolan argues that:

Thinking of utopia as processual, as an index to the possible, to the “what if,” rather than a more restrictive, finite image of the “what should be,” allows performance a hopeful cast, one that can experiment with the possibilities of the future in ways that shine back usefully on a present that's always, itself, in process. (13)

Perhaps Eric's monologue won't have changed his fraternity brother's entire worldview, or even necessarily stopped him from thinking that homosexuality is immoral, or at least undesirable. For while being able to recognize LGBTQ individuals as “human” is a step in the right direction, that choice of terminology at best brings to mind “tolerance of” rather than “acceptance of” or “support for” those with non-normative sexualities. In addition, there is no way to know if this young man will treat *all* LGBTQ individuals he meets differently in the future, or if the force of his change of heart will be reserved only for Eric and potentially other gay men interested in fraternities and other conventionally masculine activities.

Yet, in spite of all of that, and even if just for a moment, this young man was able to see past Eric's sexual orientation and to catch a glimpse of another human being

seeking connection, community, and acceptance – some of the very things which might have led this young man to desire to join a fraternity in the first place. The fact that such a moment or feeling might not translate into larger societal change on the Texas A&M campus or even last for longer than a few days after the performance’s end does not deny the power of that moment for both of these young men during the performance. Nor does it deny the personal significance that story still holds for Eric, who because of his participation in the Tim Miller workshop and the positive feedback he received about his piece, has continued to speak out about sexuality and attempt increase both education about and visibility of the LGBTQ community at Texas A&M.

Additionally, it was not only Eric’s fraternity brother who was impacted by Eric’s performance that evening. Eric recalled:

two people that I had
noo idea—
 who I met↑
 ↑*never* met them in my life
 came up to me and they said “thank you
 thank you for helping me understand”
 [...]
 and
 two↑- if I impacted two people
 that’s *two* more people at this university
 ...
 and maybe those two can impact another two
 and so on and so forth
 its like↑
 a dyn-like a ↑dominos effect
 you knock one ↑over
 you can knock *all* of them ↑down
 and
 and I feel like that’s what we’re doing here at A&M. (30 Nov. 2010)

The stories Eric related during our interview demonstrate his hope and his vision that change *could* happen – and even perhaps *is* happening – at Texas A&M, however long that change might take to move into the mainstream university culture. The image Eric paints of all the dominoes of hatred and marginalization being eventually knocked down reminds us, that rather than societal transformation having to be totalizing, it is, in itself, a process – much like utopia. Eric valorizes performance’s capacity to impact *anyone* on an emotional level, recognizing that reaching two people through performance is better than reaching zero by doing nothing, and that by doing the work change requires, rather than waiting for the moment when you can reach everyone at once, we might actually get more accomplished in the long run.⁴

Eric’s vision for how social change might be achieved at Texas A&M University highlights an important aspect of the utopian performative – its ability to provide a space in which we can begin to think and act differently. Dolan states, “part of the power I see in utopian performatives is the way in which they might, by extension, resurrect a belief or faith in the possibility of social change, even if such change simply means rearticulating notions that have been too long discredited” (21). Through his monologue, Eric was able to remind both himself and his audience that change can be achieved through an action as simple as taking the time to really listen to what someone has to say, and being able to appreciate him/her as a fellow human being. So even if the workshop performance itself wasn’t able to inspire large-scale change in the culture of Texas A&M University, it did provide a space for people’s beliefs and assumptions to be

challenged, and in that way might be able to serve as a front-runner to other, more far-reaching, changes.

When considering the transformative potential of performance, it is also important to consider the difference in experience between having been an audience member watching a performance and being an actor doing the performing. Audience members, generally speaking, come together for one night without knowing or even speaking to one another. Anyone who has gone to see a live theatrical performance or a concert knows that most of the time it would be impossible to even recognize the majority of individuals who have sat in a theater with you if you later passed one another on the street. Performances can – and do – impact audience members, but the experience of witnessing a performance and the meaning an individual takes from it can be difficult to put into words, especially for those audience members who lack the training and vocabulary to make sense of their experience in linguistic terms. Eric's frat brother and the two audience members who came to thank him after the show might not be able to explain the transformative nature of that experience to someone who was not in the audience that evening. Over time, even a transformative moment has the potential to fade and be lost to memory if there is no means to recontextualize the experience and keep the story of the importance of that moment alive. For this reason, and for many audience members, the experience of a theatrical production ceases to be a communal experience the moment they exit the theatre, return to their cars, and drive home.

Yet, in the midst of this isolation, there is another sense in which performance is fundamentally about relation. Schechner notes that “a performance ‘takes place’ in the

‘not me...not not me’ between performers; between performers and texts; between performers, texts, and environment; between performers, texts, environment, and audience” (113). This “between”-ness of performance is “the embodiment of potential, of the virtual, the imaginative, the fictive, the negative, the not not,” and is where performance achieves its power to connect, captivate, and ultimately transform the audience (113). But neither are performances only for the audience who views them. For actors, for performers, the investment of time, of energy, of passion into a performance can have meaning and significance which has the potential to last far beyond its importance in the lives of the audience. Diana Taylor makes a distinction between “the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials...and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge” (19 – emphasis original). It is in the repertoire of performance practice that we can search for the afterlife of performance.

Taylor notes that “embodied memory, because it is live, exceeds the archive’s ability to capture it. But that does not mean that performance – as ritualized, formalized, or reiterative behavior – disappears” (20). Especially at the university level, actors get together and reminisce, take classes with one another, and perform in other shows together. In these ways, they are able to maintain and strengthen the bonds forged at a particularly meaningful or transformative moment, rather than allowing them to just slip away. Through the embodiment of such behaviors and practices, actions which reside in the repertoire, many workshop participants have been able to keep the workshop experience in the forefront of their memory and affective experience. One such participant, Andrew, recalled:

I met
 some of my really great *friends* now
 out of
 out of Tim Miller
 you know
 and people that I really connected with
 and I think that
 even though
 like
 we all have our lives and we're all a little busy
 I think
 ...
 we can see each other in the hallway and *still* be really ↑close
 and still have a really close connection with one another
 because we *all*
 ...
 kind of learned something very intimately about
each
 person. (22 Feb. 2011)

Andrew ties the bonds formed in the workshop to the personal revelations each participant both experienced and witnessed during the course of the week. He articulates a belief that the workshop participants became and have stayed close friends, whether or not we have been able to maintain face-to-face contact, because of the level of emotional intimacy we have all shared. Furthermore, as a result of the depth of that intimacy, the smallest embodied gesture, like waving to one another in the hallway, can keep the workshop alive for those who experienced it.

Andrew's comment also taps into the idea of "potentiality," which Muñoz cites as central to utopia. Muñoz argues that "potentiality is always in the horizon and, like performance, never completely disappears but instead, lingers and serves as a conduit for knowing and feeling each other" (20). The experiences of the workshop left an emotional residue in the hearts of the participants which has lingered on for Andrew, me,

and I would suspect many others. The *potential* for us to eventually do more than pass in the hallway, to be less busy and able to forge closer friendships, or even to finally get together to write more pieces, has allowed some part of the week of the workshop to live on, even if only in the hearts and minds of those to whom that workshop experience has become a significant life event.

The first moment of potentiality was enacted at the end of the week of the workshop, after the performance was over, when both performers and audience members stayed in the theater talking, laughing, hugging, and refusing to leave, not wanting the magical spell of what had happened that evening to fall away. Slowly, inevitably, however, both audience members and performers trickled out of the theatre, and the cast all went to dinner to celebrate. Soon after, someone made a Facebook group so that we could all keep in touch. The original intent –proposed by Miller himself – was that this group of individuals would keep getting together to make performance pieces. Miller envisioned a cabaret club hosted by undergraduate theatre students at Texas A&M where interested parties could perform monologues, poetry, skits, and stand-up comedy – whether self-created or from an outside source.

That vision has yet to be realized. For several months after the workshop, one member of the group or another would attempt to plan a session where we could write another piece or get together and schedule weekly, or even monthly, events for writing and performing our own works. But as the semester progressed steadily toward finals, no one in the group could seem to get our schedules to mesh in any meaningful or constructive way. A variety of possible explanations exist, the first being genuine lack of

time in the midst of the department's main stage show and final papers and projects. Another possibility is lack of internal motivation, especially for the underclassmen, or even a feeling by some of the participants that they did not gain enough skills from a week-long workshop to be able to produce material without supervision by Miller or someone equally experienced in the creation of autobiographical performance pieces. It is also possible that some participants were afraid that nothing we could come up with on our own would be able to match the emotional intensity and community-building of the workshop experience, and that the memory of it would become tainted as a result.

Regardless of the reason no additional performances materialized, every time I passed someone from the workshop on campus, we would smile, wave, hug, and say that everyone should get together again really soon. This behavior seems indicative of Muñoz's assertion that "the best performances don't disappear, but instead linger in our memory, haunt our present, and illuminate our future" (104). None of the workshop participants could seem to let the experience of the workshop go, and the fact that we never managed to create more work collectively doesn't mean nothing happened or that the significance of the workshop for the individuals who participated in it necessarily diminished over time. Instead, as the days following the workshop turned to weeks and months, the potentiality of that experience shifted from the communal to the individual. The question of whether or not it would have been possible to re-create the workshop experience on *our* own was put aside, and many participants attempted instead to re-create at least some vestige of it on *my* (i.e. the individual's) own.

One such instance of re-enactment occurred when I chose to participate in *The Coming Out Monologues* of April 2011.⁵ In writing my Coming Out Monologue, I heavily referenced the Tim Miller workshop experience, highlighting the power of that specific performative moment for me as well as the ability of performance more generally to allow individuals to restructure painful events in our lives, and encouraging others to assert creative agency in the construction of their own “coming out” narratives. In *Autobiography and Performance*, Deidre Heddon speaks about the healing potential of such testimonial performances, asserting that “the process of narrativisation itself enables a sense of subjective agency, inserting it retrospectively into the event where that very agency was destroyed” (56). By choosing to reconstruct myself as the agent of my own coming out process through the very act of telling my own story, I was able to move past the trauma of being outed at a time in my life when I was unprepared to deal with the consequences of that action.

But I was certainly not the only workshop participant to have a transformative experience in the workshop, or to attempt to reconstruct or make sense of that experience after the fact. An undergraduate Theatre major, Kat, performed a monologue for the workshop about a seminal and negative event in her life which had kept its hold on her – a betrayal by a then-cherished professor she had trusted with a deeply personal creative writing project. After the workshop, Kat chronicled in her blog the way the telling of that story had changed her life, making her able to stand up for herself and speak her mind, providing her the tools to make friends in a new place, and renewing her faith in both performance and humanity in general.⁶ In *1001 Beds*, Tim Miller notes that “it is a

powerful moment when a person is asked to stand before other humans and say something that matters” (147). And that is exactly what Miller called each and every one of the workshop participants to do – to tell a story that needed to be told, a story that mattered. Part of the power of autobiographical work, then, for the performer as much as the audience, can be found in those moments when we are able to make sense of what has happened to us through the construction of a narrative around it, and through that creation, to be able to see ourselves as agents in our own life stories.

It would be a methodological oversight, however, to leave the genre of autobiographical performance itself unconsidered. In her book, Heddon illuminates

...the dangers that always accompany autobiographical performance; dangers that include problematic essentialising gestures; the construction of limiting identities; the reiteration of normative narratives; the erasure of “difference” and issues of structural inequality, ownership, appropriation and exploitation. (157)

Because autobiographical performances might not appear to involve the performing of a “character” per-se, but rather the revelation of personal “truths,” they run the risk of leaving their own ideological underpinnings unquestioned by both performer and spectator. Heddon cautions that “assuming an equation between ‘experience’ and ‘truth’ is to forget that experience is always already implicated in the structure of language since it is at the level of language that experience is interpreted, determining what, specifically, any event is able to mean” (26). Performance might allow an individual a measure of agency to interpret events differently, but that individual will also always be operating within a delineated spectrum of possible narrative structures which their given historical, cultural, and social positions allow them to inhabit successfully. The version

of my coming out narrative which I constructed for the workshop experience, for example, was no more “true” than the version my parents might tell, and each of us would have a motivation and intended response in mind when fashioning our narratives.

But the “dangers” autobiographical performance might hold for both the performer and the audience do not mean that it ought to be dismissed out of hand, either. Heddon notes that “on a very simple level, the stories performed extend the range of stories available. Being part of discourses they also extend the range of lives available to be lived” (33). So while autobiographical performances are always working within existing discourses and narrative structures, the construction of new narratives – especially by minority subjects – also contains the potential to expand those very discourses and structures, creating a space for alternative visions for the present and future. In *Autobiographical Voices*, Françoise Lionnet likewise argues for the importance of autobiographical narratives and the way they can provide “a genuine way of perceiving difference while emphasizing similarities in the process of cultural encoding from which none of us can escape” (248). Here, Lionnet’s work is reminiscent of the “not like me” but “not not like me” distinction I fashioned earlier, but it also opens up the possibility for the audience as well as the participants to engage in the work of hashing out similarity in difference. Though Lionnet’s work emphasizes racially minoritized subjects and highlights the significance of specifically female narratives, I believe the sentiment can be expanded to incorporate the transformative potential of queer performance toward which Miller and Román gesture.

All of this allows us to relate autobiographical performance back to Dolan's utopian performative and its ability to "persuade us that beyond this 'now' of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we're seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later" (7). By allowing space for the creation of individual agency, autobiographical performance becomes an important potential site in which to search for the utopian performative. The promise of the utopian performative Dolan gestures to can also be located in the ways a performance lives on in the lives of those who experienced it, as it did for me and Kat. In *Crusiiing Utopia*, Muñoz develops the term "ephemera" to describe traces which remain after queer performances. He states, "ephemera are the remains that are often embedded in queer acts, in both stories we tell one another and communicative physical gestures" (Muñoz 65). While Muñoz locates ephemera most strongly in physical gestures which can be read like dance choreography, the vocal, story-related component of ephemera is what interests me here. Though we have yet to get back together as a group, many workshop participants have continued to write performance pieces and to tell their own life stories because of that experience. Andrew noted:

It-it's really brought out
interesting
 controversial topics that now I'm just really not that afraid to talk about
now
 honestly, it's so strange
 like, I could care less about
 ...
offending people
 which I think is sometimes ↑not a good thing↑
 hahaha

but umm

I think it-it's made me *braver* in my writing. (22 Feb. 2011)

Andrew came out as bisexual in his monologue, noting that before the workshop, when he would write queer pieces, he would blow it off as an academic exercise. Now, Andrew has gained so much confidence in himself and his writing that he is willing and able to tackle a variety of difficult topics, and to encourage others to do so as well. That first moment of speaking the truth even while being afraid of being controversial, offending people, or being viewed differently because of it, will color the rest of Andrew's experiences as a writer, informing the way he approaches his own work and chooses what kinds of stories to tell.

And just as Eric's fraternity brother might remember Eric's monologue the next time he sees a gay man walking across the Texas A&M University campus, and treat that man differently as a result, those who witnessed the courage and vulnerability of the workshop participants likewise gained the potential to be altered by that experience in the future. Muñoz goes on to say that "the queer ephemera, that transmutation of the performance energy...also functions as a beacon for queer possibility and survival" (74). Those who experienced the power of the workshop performances will retain some of that transformative energy in their memories, and can recall that experience in the future at a time when their inner strength, courage, and creativity need replenishing. In this way, some small part of that experience lives on, renewing itself in the creation of each new creative endeavor.

The ephemera of the Miller workshop experience have been multi-faceted. Some participants chose to write about the workshop experience itself to make sense of its

place in their lives. Others expanded the monologues written in the workshop or developed other works inspired by the creativity found there. Still others attempted move beyond the self to re-create the experience of workshop itself with a new group of participants. Andrew decided to host a night of performance called “Freaks of Nature” for his Writing as Resistance English class in April 2011, encouraging participants to write about what makes them different from a typical Aggie. All participants from the Tim Miller workshop were invited through the Facebook page, and several participated in the event – myself included. Though we did not create our pieces for that show as an ensemble, and only came together on the night of the performance, this event can still be understood as an attempt to re-create a part of the original workshop experience, along with both the value and benefit gained from it.

Andrew’s performance showcase provides another example of how the workshop experience might be understood to have an afterlife, living on in the repertoire. Taylor notes that “the repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission” (20). Participants in the workshop seemed to be implicitly aware of this requirement, as evidenced by our desire to “get together” – to be present – and produce more work as a group, even if it never happened the way we first anticipated. But in the example of Freaks of Nature, Andrew took the idea of the repertoire a step further, inviting individuals outside the initial experience to participate in the performance of its recreation. In this way, more individuals are able to be caught up in the transmission of knowledge about autobiographical performance, and to receive its benefits. It is worth

noting that through Andrew's project, the workshop activities themselves were not reproduced, only the performance itself. If this were the only example of the workshop experience moving into the repertoire, its preservation would remain incomplete as the knowledge about how to create an ensemble performance together and embody our life narratives might be lost.

Significantly, however, Andrew's performance would not be the only attempt at reproducing the Tim Miller workshop experience. In the summer of 2011, yet another participant, Jacob, was hired by a drama camp specifically so that he could model our workshop experience for their students. Jacob used the Facebook page to ask the participants of the workshop to voice what elements of that week had been most meaningful to them, illustrating a desire to re-create not only what had been valuable for him personally, but what might have been important to the group as a whole. This move is significant because the repertoire "enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge" (Taylor 20). As evidenced by his choice to re-teach the workshop, it is clear that Jacob wanted not only to reproduce the excitement and daring of an evening of autobiographical performance. In addition, he attempted to re-embody the experience of the workshop itself, the activities and actions which had made the end result so satisfying for those involved. Jacob even seemed aware of the ephemerality of that knowledge, calling upon the rest of us to supplement his memory of the event so that less would be lost in the transmission of it to others.

Another participant, Vicente, took his monologue from the workshop and expanded it into a short one man show type piece called *Wood Grain Skin* for the spring 2011 Student New Works Festival⁷ at Texas A&M. In this case, Vicente's work moved out of the autobiographical performance genre entirely, as he was transformed into a playwright whose experiences were embodied by an actor and directed by a student, rather than remaining an agent interpreting his own life's story. This speaks to Dolan's assertion that embodying someone else's autobiographical narrative can allow us "to walk for a moment in another's shoes, to speak for a moment in another's voice, not to become and not to mock but...to feel what it might be like to *be* the other over an inevitably unbridgeable gap" (86 – emphasis original). Having witnessed both iterations of the monologue, I believe Vicente's performance of his own story was more powerful and emotionally resonant, but its translation out of the autobiographical performance genre allowed the audience to identify with the actor portraying Vicente's story in a different way. In this case, both the actor and the audience were the same remove away from the original experience, allowing the audience more leeway to participate in the "as if" of performance practice (87).

By now it should be clear that the Tim Miller workshop experience has impacted both those who participated in it and the Texas A&M University community more broadly in significant ways. Taking into consideration the workshop experience itself, the ephemera which have surpassed it, and the ways the workshop experience has been translated into the repertoire, what is its significance? In order to understand the full implications of the Miller workshop experience, it is necessary to return to the

consideration of queer intimacy-building practices. In their work, Berlant and Warner posit queer intimacy as one possible means for escaping the limitations and restrictions of heteronormativity and its relegation of intimacy to only the most private (and sexual) of realms.

But in this case, the idea of a “queer culture” can be expanded to incorporate intimate relationships based on more than sexual orientation. Just as heteronormativity encompasses “a constellation of practices that everywhere disperses heterosexual privilege as a tacit but central organizing index of social membership,” queer intimacy-building practices can run a gamut of affectual relationships (Berlant and Warner 555).

Katie noted of the workshop:

I think↑
 just doing the thing↑
 just creating it
 just being willing to
 ...
 spend a week
 ...
 immersed in other people↑
 and what’s inside your own
 ...
 brain mush↑
 ...
 ...
 is *queer*
 because
 people don’t usually do that
 people aren’t comfortable with it
 [...]
 it’s using
 ...
 it’s using this
 idea of queer
 that
 has a negative connotation↑

sometimes
 ...
 to create something so positive
 and beautiful
 and
meaningful. (22 Nov. 2010)

Here, Katie identifies as queer *any* anti-normative practice – not only sexual ones. In this sense, queer becomes what people “don’t usually do” or “aren’t comfortable with” in a broad sense. For the week of the workshop, the participants chose to be open to whatever private, messy, and even challenging information might be revealed by those involved, and to uplift it as just as – if not more – valuable as whatever surface knowledge we might normally learn about those with whom we do not regularly associate. Then, in the performance of the workshop, that information was shared with the audience, in the hopes that they, too, might be transformed. I argue that these processes of connection, sharing, and mutual transformation which occurred during the Tim Miller workshop and performance are what allowed it to function as an example of queer utopian performance at Texas A&M.

Berlant notes that “to rethink intimacy is to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living” (286). I believe that the value of the Tim Miller workshop experience was just that – a valorization of the kinds of stories which never get told on the Texas A&M University campus, a call for their importance to be recognized, and a hope that more and different kinds of lives and narratives about them might be incorporated into the day-to-day experiences of all who experienced the workshop, in whatever iteration. In closing, I return now to the performance’s title: “Broken is Better: 23 Aggies Can’t be

Wrong.” Miller himself noted the queerness of the assertion that “broken is better” – that our broken places could be a source of strength and connection, rather than something to be hidden or ignored. Just as Katie could appreciate the value of digging around in other people’s “brain mush,” the workshop participants more generally invoked the Aggie identity as a way to invite the audience to see *themselves* in our stories, and to consider what the world might be like if stories like these were also recognized as a part of the Aggie legacy.

Notes

¹ For more information, see: <http://aggietraditions.tamu.edu/team/12thman.html>

² For more information, see: <http://www.tamu.edu/about/coreValues.html>

³ The interview transcription key can be located in the nomenclature.

⁴ There are certainly numerous examples of queer activism which attempt to garner acceptance for the queer community on a much larger scale, like Pride Parades. While it would certainly be useful to attempt to theorize the value of these larger gestures when compared to the arguably smaller changes the telling of personal narratives can bring, that inquiry is outside the scope of this current research project.

⁵ *The Coming Out Monologues* is an annual event hosted by the GLBT Resource Center on the Texas A&M campus in which interested students prepare and submit monologues about an aspect of their “coming out” experience, which are then performed in the style of *The Vagina Monologues*.

⁶ Kat’s blog entry about the Tim Miller workshop and performance can be found at: http://the-college-thing.blogspot.com/2010_10_01_archive.html

⁷ The Student New Works Festival is hosted by the Department of Performance Studies at Texas A&M University, and 2011 marked its second year. For the festival, Theatre Arts majors and minors are encouraged to submit original works, and the pieces chosen for performance are directed, designed, and acted by undergraduate students. For more information, see: <http://performancestudies.tamu.edu/events/student-new-works-festival>.

CEPHEID VARIABLE

Of all the queer utopias which could be understood to exist at Texas A&M University, Cepheid Variable is in some ways the queerest.¹ Cepheid Variable is a Texas A&M student organization “devoted to the support and promotion of all things science fiction, fantasy, horror, science, and technology, and the support of the community that grows around them through an atmosphere of acceptance and kinship” (*Cepheid Variable*). General committee meetings, where members come together for announcements about upcoming activities of interest, are held every Tuesday evening at 8:06pm, but that is only the tip of the iceberg for the organization’s membership.² Cepheid also hosts numerous subcommittees that meet throughout the week, devoted to interests such as Anime, B-movies, role-playing games, video games, board games, knitting, and really almost anything a member is passionate enough about to be willing to run a subcommittee devoted to it.³ After the weekly meetings, members retire to a local Double Daves to take advantage of half-price pepperoni roll night and the opportunity for more intimate conversation.⁴ Additionally, any members who need or want a place to hang out with other Cepheids in between official events are encouraged to spend time in Studio 12.⁵

Due to the intense and long-lasting affective bonds its members form with one another, I believe Cepheid Variable functions as a queer nerd family. If at first glance those terms seem oddly combined, it is in part because the organizational dynamics of Cepheid Variable are difficult to understand and, as a result, to analyze. For example,

Cepheid has a strong joke culture and in addition to being ignorant of the meanings of references from obscure films, games, and web comics, newcomers can initially find it difficult to determine who is allowed to make what kind of jokes at whose expense. Additionally, the long history of the organization has fostered the development of traditions and terminology which must be passed down to new members, a process which takes time and effort on the part of the current membership.⁶ Moreover, becoming a Cepheid means doing more than paying one's dues and attending the weekly general meetings. Newcomers who treat Cepheid like other student organizations will have difficulty forging close relationships within it because the general committee meetings are meant to function as a gateway to what the organization *really* has to offer its membership, rather than as an end in themselves.

In the pages that follow, I explore the links between the “nerd,” “queer,” and “family” identities of Cepheid Variable. I argue that the intersection of these identity-markers and the performance practices which reinforce them enable Cepheid Variable to create a utopian space on the Texas A&M University campus for those students who do not fit traditional notions of Aggie identity. I will end with an exploration of two of the most salient performance practices found in Cepheid Variable: noise-making and storytelling. I argue that these performance practices construct, support, and interweave each element of Cepheid identity, allowing the organization to perpetuate and reaffirm its utopian and counterpublic statuses on the Texas A&M University campus.

While I grew up watching *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and *Stargate SG-1* with my father and claim a nerd identity as a result, I was introduced to Cepheid Variable via

relationships built with several self-identified nerds in the GLBT Aggies in the early stages of my participant-observation. I was alternately encouraged to join Cepheid if I was interested in nerds and nerdy things and told why others had gone once and chosen to stay away. Frequent descriptions of the organization's members as "weird" or "out there," coupled with the initially explicit connections between "queer" and "nerd" identities the overlap in membership between the Cepheid and the GLBT Aggies suggested, led to the decision to explore Cepheid as an example of how queer utopia might function beyond the realm of LGBTQ identity.

Cepheids as Queer Nerds

Cepheid Variable proved to be a difficult site for analysis in part because nerd culture itself is under-theorized, making it difficult to discern how much of the uniqueness of Cepheid Variable can be linked to its position as a home for nerds and geeks. As Jason Tocci observes in his 2009 dissertation, "Geek cultures: Media and identity in the digital age," not much research to date has focused on nerd/geek culture as a cohesive whole.⁷ Rather, scholars have explored the nerd/geek identity and its relationship to gender or racial identities or focused on computer, gamer, or participatory fan cultures, all of which can be understood to overlap with nerd/geek culture, but are not necessarily constitutive of it.⁸ Additionally, no consensus on the semantic differences between "nerd" and "geek" has been found, even among those who self-identify with either term, a fact which has been re-affirmed in my own participant-observation.⁹ The lack of scholarship investigating how nerds and geeks form communities across various

interests and hobbies makes it difficult to pull apart the different threads contributing to the formation of Cepheid identity. It is possible that much of the intense bonding and loyalty Cepheids express for one another can be traced back to the social exclusion many nerds experience during childhood.

In researching nerd/geek culture, I found that the diversity of Cepheid Variable's membership causes the organization to defy common understandings of this identity, or else points to a shift in cultural conceptions about those categories. The image of a friendless, sexless nerd in a white, button-down shirt complete with a pocket protector and large black glasses held together by a piece of tape on the bridge was conjured by several authors and framed as quintessential. This image, however, does not fit the nerds/geeks I have encountered during my time with Cepheid. This dissonance between the ideal nerd, as it were, and nerds-on-the-ground could have developed in part because much discussion of the nerd/geek category references its origins in teasing and name-calling in middle and early high school. What makes a kid a nerd or a geek at school isn't always obvious to either the kid at which the insult is being hurled or the one doing the hurling. In *Nerds: Who They Are and Why We Need More of Them*, David Anderegg observes that:

...the nerd/geek stereotype is so heterogeneous that it's awfully hard to understand. It is some combination of school success, interest in precision, unself-consciousness, closeness to adults, and interest in fantasy—things that just don't hang together, conceptually or in real people. But to normal people, all these things are not normal. (213-14)

What separates nerd/geek kids from the popular kids, then, is exhibiting one or more of a set of traits which have been termed “abnormal” or “undesirable” and often juvenile. As

a result, those individuals who come to take on the nerd/geek label as an identity in itself may find they have nothing in common except a general sense of being “different” from many of their peers, as well as perhaps some similar, initially solitary interests, like reading books or playing video games. This might also explain why, while Cepheid Variable markets itself toward nerds/geeks in particular, anyone who wants to join is welcomed.

Though Cepheid is certainly an organization where individuals with nerdy/geeky interests tend to congregate, another difficulty I faced when attempting to analyze the organization is that no specific major or level of nerdiness/geekiness is required or even necessarily preferred among its membership. This might be because, as Tocci notes, “geeks have developed a sense of cultural cohesion that was previously difficult to identify as anything other than a shared sense of ‘otherness’” (10-11). From its beginnings, nerd/geek culture seems to have had fluid boundaries, and to have been a place where those who don’t quite “fit in” to mainstream culture – for whatever reason – could congregate. A similar sort of identity ambivalence can be found among Cepheids, who note on their Facebook page that the group is dedicated to “science fiction/horror/fantasy/whatever the hell else we can get away with” (“Cepheid Variable”). Perhaps Cepheid tries to “get away with” as broad a definition of its membership as possible so as not to exclude anyone who might feel marginalized but has yet to explore the science fiction or fantasy genres so many nerds and geeks have taken solace in over the years.

Understanding nerd/geek culture as founded in “otherness” and a denial of normalcy, however, begs the question of what it means to be “normal” in the first place, and how someone might know whether s/he is. Anderegg notes that “when you try to identify people who *are* psychologically normal, the one reliable thing that seems to distinguish them, above all else, is that they *define* themselves as normal. They squeeze out any and all weirdness because they don’t want it” (Anderegg 213 – emphasis original). If what counts as normal is a matter of opinion in the first place, many nerds/geeks do not see the value of buying into such an arbitrary system. Certainly, some individuals labeled as a nerd/geek in childhood fight back against that label by attempting to claim normalcy in adulthood. Many nerds/geeks, however, choose instead to devalue the standards by which they were so harshly judged, and to claim *weirdness*, rather than normalcy, as a source of pride and as something to be cherished. The equation of nerds/geeks with those who are “not normal,” combined with the pleasure many Cepheids in particular take in being labeled as “weird,” are part of what allows the organization and its membership to be read as queer. In *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, Alexander Doty identifies the need to continue to make sense of established identity categories “while simultaneously attempting to understand, and to articulate, the ways in which these categories don’t quite represent our attitudes,” arguing that “ultimately, queerness should challenge and confuse” the way we make sense of the world (xvii). In this vein, Cepheids are queer because they challenge both traditional notions of nerd/geek identity and the value of wanting to be “normal” in the first place, taking

pleasure in the fact that the requirements for Cepheid identity cannot ever be firmly pinned down.

Additionally, if being “normal” or “popular” becomes less and less important after high school (Anderegg 229), those who understand nerd/geek identity as an opposition to normalcy will need to assert their weirdness more and more strongly over time. Tocci gestures toward just such a phenomenon when he asserts that “the popular image of geeks – and geeks’ image of themselves – tends to remain associated with a sense of rejection, marginalization, awkwardness, and more deliberate nonconformity well into adult life” (147). It could be that Cepheids, like other nerds/geeks entering adulthood, defy categorization or definition in part because they have learned to find pleasure and fun in an aesthetic of non-conformity and weirdness. Tocci notes that nerds/geeks can reclaim an originally negative identity by “developing a Nerd group with a resistive character analogous to that of the Punk/Goth/Freak crowd” (30-31). Cepheid Variable is an example of just such a group, as its members take pleasure in both resisting authority and the reputation Cepheid has garnered over the years for being full of “weirdoes,” “oddballs,” and people who are “just too out there for me.”

In this way, both the inclusive and anti-normative pulls located within Cepheid Variable are what link it to queerness. Certainly, associations between nerd/geek and queer culture are not unprecedented. Anderegg notes that “kids’ concepts of nerds and gays overlap a great deal, a fact that contributes greatly to the lingering animosity toward nerds among adults” (19). Because “nerd” or “geek” is not an identity-marker as visible as sex or race, Anderegg argues that children tend to associate it with other “invisible”

identity categories – like sexual orientation. As a result of this childhood connection, coupled with a defiance of gender norms, many nerds/geeks, particularly *males*, are often assumed to *be* queer, or at least, sexually incompetent, well into adulthood. Thus excluded from participation in discourses surrounding the formation of both conventional friendships and heterosexual romantic relationships, nerds/geeks, perhaps even unconsciously, can develop intimacy-building practices similar to those of their LGBTQ peers – despite the fact that many nerds/geeks, in Cepheid Variable at least, self-identify as straight.

In his work, Doty also argues for an expansion of “queer,” maintaining that a queer framework can be used to “describe a wide range of impulses and cultural expressions” and that “basically heterosexual, straight-identifying people can experience queer moments” (2-3). Building on this sense of fluidity, I argue that it is possible to read the construction of intimate relationships among Cepheids as queer regardless of the sexual orientation of any of the group’s members. In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz interrogates the performance principle’s overly repressive denial of human pleasure, placing queerness at the heart of its refusal. Muñoz goes on to say that this queer refusal incorporates “not just homosexuality but the rejection of normal love that keeps a repressive social order in place” (134). The Cepheid assertion that one’s nerd friends can become a “family” equally – if not sometimes more – important than the family in which one was raised can be read as a rejection of “normal” love in favor of the pleasure other kinds of intimate relationships can bring.

Cepheid as “The Family You Didn’t Know You Had”

While nerds/geeks unite in part over a refusal to value the cultural standards by which “normal” and “appropriate” behavior is judged, Tocci also notes that “feeling like a social outcast can be mitigated through the construction of ‘geek culture’ – both in the sense of shared meanings and experiences, and in the sense of media and material culture” (125). The act of celebrating one’s own weirdness and uniqueness, coupled with the deep affective bonds which can be forged by those who unite through a sense of shared marginalization, can cause those who participate in nerd/geek communities to form deep and lasting friendships with one another. And because of the stigmatization many nerds/geeks have suffered, these bonds often go much deeper than those based on shared interests and hobbies alone, the sole uniting factor upon which many other types of student organizations are based.

This sense of deep connection and strong loyalty among nerds/geeks first manifested itself in my participant-observation through references to Cepheid functioning like a *family* for many of its members. Recalling her first experience at a Cepheid meeting, Carleen explained:

it was *immediately*
just like↑
...
warm and ↑friendly
and I was immediately
like
...
welcomed
[...]
it wasn’t like↑
“we have to get to know you first↑
[unintelligible] with you”

it was like↑
 “Hey!
 Come on!
 Sit down!”
 ...
 you're here↑
 and you're a↑
 ...
person. (20 April 2011)¹⁰

In our interview, Carleen labeled herself as an “outsider” several times, and as someone who has difficulty making friends or participating in social environments more generally. In Cepheid Variable, however, Carleen remembers finding a group where she felt automatically welcomed and included, if for no other reason than because she was “a person.” And Carleen was not alone in this experience. Many of my interlocutors, when asked to recall their introduction to Cepheid, noted stumbling upon members of the organization quite by accident, whether by being mistaken for a Cepheid while sitting in the basement of the MSC doing homework or meeting Cepheids through a sub-committee like SCA or Camarilla and being welcomed to the weekly general committee meetings as well.¹¹ Many current members remember being welcomed and accepted as a part of the group long before they heard the word Cepheid or realized what it meant, and have stuck with the organization in part because of that mentality.

In addition hearing about and seeing Cepheids being friendly and welcoming to newcomers, I noticed many times during my participant-observation a fierce loyalty among Cepheid’s members: once you’re a Cepheid, other Cepheids will go out of their way to take care of you “because that’s what Cepheids do.” Alyssa, speaking of this phenomenon, observed:

they like to sa—*Tray* likes to say, “We’re the family you didn’t know you had”

uhh

...

But I think it’s more like↑

...

I think it’s a little bit more like the *mafia* haha
like

....

you gotta know somebody to get in
and then you gotta prove yourself
somehow

...

and
you just gotta be willing to stick with it

...

and
then you’ll never get out. (10 March 2010)

If Tocci’s assertion that “nerds and geeks tend to be considered maladjusted rejects by nearly everyone (sometimes even including themselves)” is true, then the welcoming nature of Cepheid Variable, the need for its members to prove their allegiance to the organization, and the resulting, sometimes life-long loyalties and relationships which result make sense (36). It is not a leap to presume that those nerds/geeks who spent friendless childhoods feeling ostracized for their differences would be interested in forming communities where that kind of behavior is not tolerated. It also follows that such individuals would be protective of their new-found friends and create, even unconsciously, criteria for determining which members are most dedicated to – and most in need of – what the organization has to offer. Nor is it a stretch to think that those nerds/geeks most in need of a community and who might be forming close-knit relationships for the first time through an organization like Cepheid would want to not

only continue those relationships, but find a way to perpetuate the organization which first made them possible.

Additionally, the queer Cepheid family is able to serve a variety of needs because it incorporates both face-to-face and virtual/digital interaction. In his work, Tocci notes that “while the economic import of the internet has often been proclaimed (with some truth) to have rescued the *image* of the geek, the way in which it has helped develop the *collective identity* of the geek is to show nerds that they are not alone” (75-76 – emphasis original). While members of Cepheid Variable do prize face-to-face interaction, the organization also maintains use of a website, a Wiki, numerous Facebook groups, an IRC channel, and a Ventrilo server.¹² Even without these on-line elements, however, it is possible that the “collective identity” Tocci identifies, while first created on the internet, can now be found in “real-life” nerd/geek communities as well. Benjamin Nugent alludes to something similar when speaking about convention (i.e., “con”) attendance in *American Nerd: The Story of My People*. He writes, “You go to a con to enter an alternate universe where status is expertise on a book or a movie or a TV show, where the nerd habits of collecting and cataloging and rating are normal and esteemed” (Nugent 43). In some ways, the structure of Cepheid Variable creates the best of all possible worlds in nerd/geek culture, allowing its membership a year-round “alternate universe” of acceptance complete with possibilities for both on-line and face-to-face interaction, opportunities to learn about pretty much any faction of the nerd/geek pantheon, an organizational history spanning several decades, and an annual convention of their very own.¹³

But regardless of all the technology Cepheid incorporates and the opportunities the sub-committees provide for exposure and teaching in all areas of nerd/geek culture, what keeps many members coming back to Cepheid are the people, and more specifically, the *relationships*. When asked what drew him into Cepheid and kept him coming back, Dre recalled:

↑there's definitely a *camaraderie* in Cepheid
 we're↑ very much *there* for each other
 uhm
 ...
 ...
 a lot of the time
 ...
 ↑uhm
 and ↑one thing that comes to mind is I was having
 a ↑*really* bad time
 [...]
 and
 I wasn't feeling too
 too good about myself at the ↑time
 [inhales]
 ↑and so
 uhm
 I
 I was ↑actually hanging out with my friend *Scott*↑ that night
 ...
 you know
 ↑he noticed something was wrong
 and whatnot
 [inhales]
 and
 ↑you know
 ...
 he↑
 devoted his *whole*↑ time
 ...
 you know
 ↑we had just ↑barely met and everything
 ↑just to try to make *me* feel better

and
 [...]

it was just the fact that

you↑ know

a person that just barely *met* me

...

but I was a *Cepheid*. (22 Sept. 2011)

Dre recounted this experience with a sense of astonishment mixed with respect for an organization filled with people who would invest so much time and effort in someone they “just barely *met*.” Yet Dre has been only one of many recipients of Cepheid generosity and loyalty during the tenure of my participant-observation. In one of our conversations, Scott recounted to me his own story about the Cepheids who took him the hospital at 3:00am when he was first having trouble with his diabetes, and who made sure he got to class okay while he worked to get his condition under control. Scott ran for – and won – the position of Cepheid Chair for the 2011-2012 school year in part because of the passion his fellow Cepheids had inspired in him and his sense that Cepheid has been, and should continue to be, a family for those who need it.

While participation in and dedication to Cepheid is prized by the membership, the benefits of the Cepheid family experience are both immediate and longitudinal. Moreover, it is possible for some individuals who never attended A&M to become honorary Cepheids, reaping the benefits of Cepheid loyalty and protection by proxy. Such was the case in fall 2011 when a wildfire destroyed the home of the Studio 12 janitor. For several weeks following the incident, Cepheid collected monetary donations and clothing for the janitor’s family because “we have a tradition of helping our friends” and because “it’s the right thing to do.” Also in fall 2011, an Elder Cepheid D-named

Muffin died after complications following a motorcycle accident.¹⁴ During the general meeting that week, any members who knew him were invited to share their memories, and a Cepheid Muster was planned for AggieCon 43.¹⁵ In the wake of such a tragic moment, Cepheid members young and old were reminded that Cepheid is a family, and that once you're a Cepheid, "we'll always remember you."

Cepheid and Queer Intimacy

As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner assert, "making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation" (558). For its members, Cepheid becomes a chosen family, and the loyalty and devotion Cepheids feel for one another as a result flies in the face of traditional notions of biological family loyalty. An example of the perpetuation of queer intimacy-building practices in Cepheid Variable can be found through an analysis of some Cepheid traditions. One Elder I interviewed, Bill, mentioned the prevalence of communal living among Cepheids in the 1970s, citing this practice as above all else a means for saving money. To this day, the tradition of one or more "Cepheid houses" exists, as well as the tendency for Cepheids to be roommates with one another even in apartment complexes or dormitories. Bill, however, admitted that he bought the "Monkey House" he lived in during his college days, and went to note that:

probably↑
 ...
 40 or 50 of us still get together
 every year

the weekend
before Thanksgiving
 ...
 and we call it
 ↑*Monkey-giving*. (28 Sept. 2010)

Bill cites the start of that tradition as a year it was discovered that some Cepheids didn't have anywhere to go over the holiday; it has persisted, however, even after some of the tradition's initiators have moved away from Bryan-College Station and started their own biological families. Additionally, Cepheid Variable still hosts its own annual group Thanksgiving, usually held the Sunday after the official holiday. Both current and former members attend Cepheid Thanksgiving (or "Thanks-nerding"), a practice which speaks to the potential longevity of relationships built on queer intimacies.

Cepheid Thanksgiving seems to be the clearest example of a queer intimacy-building practice which began as a reaction to the failure of the conventional social order to provide for all of the members of the organization. It has grown and persisted over the years, however, as both a symbol of that struggle and of the desire for there to always be an alternative source of intimacy for Cepheids, regardless of any members' individual relationship to their biological family. Interestingly, a few Cepheids rescheduled their own family dinners to stay in Bryan-College Station for Thanksgiving Day 2011 in order to work the Cepheid football concession stand. This shows that even when my interlocutors have established relationships of intimacy and connection with their biological families, they still assert the desire and need to form other kinds of close relationships. Bill noted that Cepheid seemed to function as "a home away from home" for many of its members, but I would argue that Cepheid has the potential to become not

just *a*, but *the* home for many others. Rephil, for example, explained that there weren't any nerds/geeks at his high school.¹⁶ As a result, when he discovered Cepheid in college,

Rephil realized:

this↑ is the group of people I *always* wanted to spend time with↑
and
now↑ I intend to live↑ here so I can
do↑ that
...
...
I-I wanna live↑ in this area so I can help foster the next↑ group of
Cepheids who may feel the same way I↑ did. (26 April 2011)

Rephil met his now-wife Tray at a Cepheid Variable meeting, and in my interview with the couple Tray recounted to me that she's been a bridesmaid several times since joining Cepheid, as well as being named the godmother of several Cepheid spawn.¹⁷ The most devoted Cepheids choose to spend holidays with one another and to share seminal life moments, like marriage and child-raising, with their fellow Cepheids.

Michel Foucault has remarked that “since some of the relationships in society are protected forms of family life... the variations which are not protected are, at the same time, often much richer, more interesting and creative than the others” (72). Bill's recollection of the occasional occurrence of dishes such as emu sausage at Monkeygiving is one example of that kind of creativity-in-action, as are Cepheid traditions like singing “Piano Man” at any Cepheid event which lasts to 2:00am. And though some might argue that Bill buying his old college residence or Tray and Rephil choosing to raise their family in Bryan-College Station because of Cepheid is proof that nerds and geeks never do “grow up,” such actions could also evidence the desire to protect the Cepheid family, providing it with both a sense of continuity and permanence

– a “home” to which Cepheids can always return, or choose to never leave. And if anyone would ever judge Cepheids for their choices in such matters, one of Tocci’s observations certainly applies: “even though people might think they were weirdoes, they were having too much fun to care” (322). One of the joys of participation in Cepheid – and perhaps nerd/geek culture more generally – is having the permission to let loose and have fun. These moments of joy could also mark a stepping out of what José Esteban Muñoz has called “straight time” and into a world where “letting your freak flag fly,” as Rachel put it, is not only acceptable, but a necessary part of living in the world. In this case, however, stepping out of straight time wouldn’t necessitate an acceptance of a sexually queer identity – only elasticity in the heteronormative social order.

But lest I paint too bright a picture of Cepheid Variable, it is important to note that chosen families often run into the same problems and difficulties as their biological counterparts. In our interview, Tray also understood the need to not get swept up in nostalgia or sentimentality. Though her love for Cepheid runs deep, Tray qualified it by saying:

It’s not ↑always as
 bright↑-eyed and starry↑ as all that↑
 sometimes we really get on each other’s ↑nerves
 and I mean↑
 it’s ↑kinda like a real family
 when there’s some days where you’re just like
 “uugh
 I just can’t stand this”
 you know
 being in the same room as these people
 [...]
 but in↑ the end these are still all↑ people that you’d do whatever it took ta
 ...

take↑ *care* of

...

...

↑even when they're driving you nuts. (26 April 2011)

Tocci notes that “the idea that geeks have anything in common at all worth celebrating” is “a way of building ‘safe’ contexts for people who might feel ashamed of their interests, or just more generally socially awkward and reserved” (178-79). Cepheid functions as just such a “safe” space for many of its members – a place where they can feel welcome and free to “geek out” without fear of repercussions. But the desire for connection and acceptance which drives much of the work Cepheid does on the A&M campus does not make that work any easier. Nor does it erase the insurgence of personal drama which seems unpreventable in a group of almost one hundred individuals – especially when the culture of Cepheid Variable in particular encourages and values eccentricity.

“Too Loud and Crazy”: The Construction of Noise in Cepheid

Cepheid Variable is able to create and recreate itself as a queer nerd family in part through the perpetuation of organizational traditions and the construction of a unique Cepheid culture. One of the most salient components of Cepheid culture is also one of the first things many people notice about Cepheid Variable: that its members are loud, and unashamedly so. The first time I entered the meeting space of the organization, I was greeted by a mass of about seventy college-age students, all broken up into smaller groups, talking and laughing amongst themselves. Members use the time before the meeting as an opportunity to catch up with friends and socialize; for a newcomer, the

rambunctious controlled chaos which results can be quite intimidating, and it is often difficult to manage to get a word in edgewise, at least in the beginning. In fact, most of the stories I heard from non-Cepheids when I mentioned thinking of joining the organization were cautionary tales warning me that its members were loud and weird, and that attending a meeting would likely only result in my developing a headache and wanting to leave. The loudness of a Cepheid meeting can be understood as an example of how “sound production from traditional practices [can be] sometimes regarded as ‘intrusive’ to members not involved in those events” (Lee 89). One of the ways Cepheids resist the norm and assert their uniqueness is through the production of an excess of sound, which allows their point of view to be literally heard above others’ and which keeps those unwilling to deal with a certain level of unruliness or weirdness away.

While the acoustic culture of Cepheid Variable can take some getting used to, once it is understood it ceases to register as only noise, and instead, can be seen as a source of identity formation and intimacy-building. Tacchi notes the way sound can be mobilized to help “establish and maintain identities” (242). Cepheid sound practices are one important source for the construction of group identity and also help establish Cepheid’s relationship to the campus culture of Texas A&M more generally. Through the manipulation of sound, members of Cepheid are able to construct a different approach to group interaction—one which reinforces their uniqueness and creates a space for play and creativity. Veronica, the student who introduced me to Cepheid Variable, noted:

there are some people who come once and run away because we’re too loud and crazy

and that's okay
 we don't need everyone who has ever watched Firefly to love us
 we are a very specific kind of people. (26 April 2011)

Veronica's comments point to the possibility of using noise as a barrier, or even a rite of passage—a means for weeding out those individuals ill-suited for participation in Cepheid. If the loudness scares you away, you're probably better off going elsewhere anyway.

Additionally, through her assertion that Cepheids are “a very specific kind of people,” Veronica highlights an awareness on the part of Cepheids that they are not typical Aggies and that their interests and modes of being do not necessarily translate to a larger or more universal audience. Doty argues that queerness can be understood as “a militant sense of difference” (3). Through the choice to behave loudly, Cepheids continuously and purposefully assert that they are not the same as other campus groups, effectively marking themselves as queer within the Aggie culture. Indeed, Veronica's statement alludes to the fact that not even all nerds/geeks would feel comfortable participating in Cepheid, because of the way sound is mobilized in group interactions. In this way, Cepheid Variable fits Michael Warner's definition of a *counterpublic*, though in a way different from the Tim Miller Workshop. Warner argues that “the discourse that constitutes [a counterpublic] is not merely a different or alternative idiom, but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness” (*Publics and Counterpublics* 86). As Veronica's statements make clear, Cepheids are always aware that potential recruits might end up “run[ning] away” from the organization, marking it not only as different from the majority, but negatively so. And if

the “loud and crazy” nature of Cepheid Variable is the source of its counterpublic status, this only serves to reaffirm that control of sound is one way those in power can assert and maintain their dominant status.

Warner goes on to state that while counterpublic discourse, like public discourse, addresses itself to indefinite strangers, these “addressees are socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse; ordinary people are presumed to not want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene” (*Publics and Counterpublics* 86). By asserting themselves as a group with which “ordinary” or “normal” people would not want to be associated, members of Cepheid are able to create a haven for those individuals who have no desire to be ordinary, or to be viewed as such by others. In this way, the counterpublic status of Cepheid Variable makes it as beloved by its members as it might be disparaged by outsiders. This disavowal of normalcy also ties Cepheid practices to the construction of a queer utopia. Muñoz notes that “queerness presents itself as the ‘extraordinary’ while at the same time fleeing the charge of being ‘ordinary’” (21). As has been seen, members of Cepheid Variable mark themselves as decidedly *not* ordinary through discourse; as a result, they are able to imagine a world in which not only loudness, but nerdiness/geekiness itself can be elevated as extraordinary and as something to be desired.

Yet, in addition to highlighting their differentness from other student organizations at A&M, the emphasis on noise-making in Cepheid could also be seen as a strategy for community-building within the organization. In her work on radio, Jo Tacchi

explores the relationship between sound, silence, and sociability, noting that “for [those] who see their lives as lacking in sociability, silence can offer a reminder of their undesired social situation, and so it is to be avoided (244). One possible explanation for the intensity of sound created in the space of Cepheid Variable is the social silence which might otherwise plague the lives of the nerds/geeks the organization is designed to help. If an undesired condition of social silence could be understood as the norm for many nerds/geeks, it makes sense that once they are finally able to interact with others in a social space, an overcompensation of sorts would be likely to take place. Just as Tacchi noted that listening to and engaging with a local music radio station enabled one of her informants to feel she was “sharing her passion with other people” and to consequently “think that she was not alone,” Cepheid provides a space for nerds/geeks to engage in conversations with like-minded individuals and to be able to share a passion which might seem “over the top” in other contexts (253).

The freedom Cepheid Variable provides its members to participate in these otherwise stigmatized modes of being is one of its greatest assets. Many members have noted that Cepheid was one of the first places they were able to forge deep and lasting friendships, and that this became possible, in part, because membership in Cepheid did not require the same level of social finesse membership in other – more dominant – groups often would. Robert, a graduate student who resumed attendance at Cepheid meetings in 2011, recalled that his freshman year of college:

I needed Cepheid because I needed people to talk to ↑
 who would talk back
 ‘cause I didn’t know how to communicate well
 I-I was always the *nerd* growing up

so I didn't really have↑
 ...
 social↑ skills
 but Ce↑pheid
 who they are really *for* are those
 deep in the closet nerds
 who have *no idea* how to talk to people. (4 March 2011)

Aggie identity is marked by an emphasis on sociability – becoming a member of one of the friendliest campuses in the world requires that incoming students be willing and capable to participate in the social life of the university. As a result, anyone not inherently comfortable with saying, “Howdy!” to a complete stranger is going to have difficulty fitting into the Aggie community successfully. But, as Robert alludes, because nerds/geeks are likely to have been denied opportunities for sociability growing up, they can become even more marginalized when confronted with a space or a group that requires intense sociability as a prerequisite for access.

Unlike on the campus at large, however, in Cepheid Variable, a lack of social skills is not automatically bad. For Cepheids, rather than being a source of stigmatization, a lack of social skills is the norm, or at least not something worth giving a second thought. Through membership in Cepheid, nerd/geek identity is transformed into something to be proud of, rather than something to be self-conscious about or hide from others. In this way, Cepheid provides its members with “a safe environment in which to work on one’s sociality” (Tacchi 242-3). By creating a space where “as much as you annoy the shit out of people, they’ll take care of you,” Cepheid allows its members to participate in a process of trial and error, knowing that minor social faux pas are par for the course (4 March 2011). In the space Cepheid creates, a reversal of the

norm actually takes place. Those unwilling to deal with or ignore a certain level of social awkwardness become the minority, and probably will not last long in an organization designed to meet other needs.

In this way, the “loud and crazy” nature of Cepheid meetings can be read as a compensation mechanism for its membership—in Cepheid spaces, the social protocol which would be required in other circumstances is temporarily suspended, and members have the freedom to talk out of turn or make jokes (within certain limits) in a way which would often not be possible in other kinds of spaces. Like radio, the soundscape created by and for Cepheids within the context of their time together “can, on a very personal and intimate level, provide a form of sociality that allows for the creation of an alternative environment for living” (Tacchi 255). In the space of Cepheid, sound is a source of fun rather than a means of control and therefore functions as a form of resistance against the more militarized soundscape of Texas A&M. As Scott, the 2011-2012 Chair of Cepheid, stated:

I go to other groups
and
I think↑
“You’re not doing it right.
...
You’re not having *fun*.
...
You’re just here to put this on your resume
and that’s not what it’s a↑bout.” (15 Nov. 2010)

Unlike the numerous religious or service-oriented student organizations on campus, the main goal of Cepheid Variable (even when doing serious work like Trick-or-Treating for

UNICEF or working Concessions for the university) is to provide its membership a space to have fun, laugh, make friends, and not take each other or life too seriously.

Even when incorporating the acoustic traditions of Texas A&M into their organizational practices, Cepheids refuse to take them very seriously. The Chair of Cepheid Variable opens every general meeting with “Howdy!” the traditional Aggie greeting. But in a Cepheid meeting, the texture and subtext of the word are mobilized very differently than they would be in other spaces. Likely due to Texas A&M’s history as a military institution, when “Howdy!” is mobilized as a form of address to quiet a large group of students (unlike its mobilization as a form of greeting between a handful of students), the tone is disciplinarian, conveying the subtext, “You know it’s time to be quiet and pay attention to me now.” In Cepheid, however, the Chair screams “Howdy!” at the top of his lungs like some kind of crazed drill sergeant – even when only a few people happen to be talking in the space and a lower tone of voice could get the same job done. In this way, the Chair is able to fulfill two goals at once: teaching freshman Cepheids how “Howdy!” is mobilized on campus, but also poking fun at its militaristic roots and disciplinary nature at the same time. Due to their counterpublic status, members of Cepheid Variable are unwilling to separate themselves completely from the dominant discourses and traditions of Texas A&M; they mobilize the “Howdy!” discourse, but do so parodically, knowing those on the inside will get the joke. Additionally, in the space of a Cepheid meeting, the call of “Howdy!” is as likely to be returned with, “What the hell do you want?” (or another, but similar, retort) as it is with a repeated “Howdy!” In this way, Cepheids are able to turn what might otherwise be

considered a stifling discourse into a moment of play and subversion, knowing that in Cepheid space, there is always the opportunity to talk back to those in power.

James C. Scott notes that “most ruling groups take great pains to foster a public image of cohesion and shared beliefs. Disagreements, informal discussions, [and] off-guard commentary are kept to a minimum and whenever possible, sequestered out of sight” (155). The opposite is often true when it comes to Cepheid Variable. When entering the space of a Cepheid meeting, chatter and laughter are the norm. Members are quick to respond to almost any statement – even, and perhaps especially, by an officer – with a joke or witty retort, keeping the atmosphere lively and laid-back. One member, Bandcamp, called Cepheid an antisocial social organization, claiming that it was more attuned to the individual, and that no one expects that any other member would be the same as they are (27 April 2011). Bandcamp went on to note that what makes Cepheid really interesting is that a devout Christian and an atheist can sit beside one another and still find something they have in common to talk about, and that Cepheid draws “all kinds” of people because the structure of the organization allows it to fit a variety of needs and interests.

Rather than needing to create an image of unity and cohesion, like the Aggie identity attempts to do through its appeal to a set of shared core values, members of Cepheid rally around a set of shared *interests* and common references, but also understand that liking the same television shows or video games doesn’t guarantee that members will be alike in other respects, or require that such a level of commonality even be an organizational goal. What is most likely to endear an individual to the Cepheid

community is the wherewithal to make an appropriately snarky comment in response to an officer's announcement, rather than blithely agreeing with someone's opinion in an attempt to make friends or avoid rocking the boat. One thing I have always been able to appreciate about Cepheids is their ability and desire to engage in conversations about important topics, without being so invested in one side or the other that a real debate is impossible. While the constant commentary during the meetings might appear disrespectful to an outsider, it is actually a by-product of intense engagement and highly-attuned listening skills – you cannot make an effective joke at someone else's expense unless you are really in the moment with him/her, paying close attention to what s/he has to say. This is an organizational dynamic it took me many months to pinpoint, and I believe one of the greatest sources of fun in Cepheid meetings is the intense sense of community which can result from paying that level of attention to those around you.

Through such uses of sound, being “a Cepheid” becomes just as important an identity marker as being “an Aggie” is the larger community of Texas A&M – both identities tie an individual to a community with a rich sense of heritage and tradition, a community which can be relied upon in times of need and even come to serve many of the same functions a family would. Tray, Robert, and Scott have all explicitly referred to Cepheid as a family at one point or another, highlighting how “communities of people construct their own *spaces* through their practices of living” (Lee 94). In one way, what marks a space as a Cepheid space would be the existence of members of the organization in a particular physical location. But in another way, Cepheid spaces are constructed through modes of behavior – what Lee calls “practices of living.” The loud, rowdy, and

fun atmosphere of Cepheid creates a space where members can let down their guard and be less concerned about how others might perceive them. This allows certain kinds of people who might not feel welcome elsewhere on the Texas A&M campus to still have a family of their own.

When asked think about the role Cepheid Variable fills at A&M, Scott commented:

↑someone asked↑
 you↑ know
 as a group↑
 ...
 ↑what is our *goal*↑
 what are we ↑here for
 ...
 aandd
 ...
 Coleman's response was
 "We're here so *no* one ever has to sit at the lunch table alone↑ again
 just ↑like in high↑ school." (11 March 2011)

Scott's comment alludes to the recruitment of new Cepheids, where anyone sitting alone and in silence will be invited to join in on the conversation and laughter inherent in Cepheid spaces. Warner notes that "counterpublics are spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative, not replicative merely," and Scott's comment points to such a moment of transformation – the creation of a world where "Howdy!" would mark the beginning of a conversation, and not be mobilized as an end in itself (*Publics and Counterpublics* 88). The world Cepheids imagine is one in which everyone has a community to belong to, regardless of how closely they adhere to dominant rhetorics or models of behavior. Carleen, noted that getting involved in Cepheid was:

one of the first times I've↑
 felt like
 a *group* of people just kind of opened their arms to me
specifically. (20 April 2011)

Though Texas A&M markets itself as a friendly and inclusive space, a family in its own right, the actual experiences of students do not always match that picture. The world-making project of the university is necessarily exclusionary, and the members of Cepheid Variable believe it is their duty to attempt to fill in the gaps. Attali notes that “the only possible challenge to repetitive power takes the route of a breach in social repetition and the control of noisemaking...the permanent affirmation of the right to be different...the right to make noise...the right to compose one’s life” (132). Every Tuesday, the members of Cepheid Variable assert those very rights. By speaking loudly and out of turn, by being unashamed to crack jokes, or laugh, or tell stories, by asserting that being a nerd or a geek is something to be proud of, Cepheids resist the power hierarchy of Texas A&M, and create a space where anyone is welcome, as long as you aren’t afraid to be just as loud and crazy as everybody else.

Cepheid Storytelling

While the community-building practices of Cepheid Variable are certainly influenced by the collective identity of nerd/geek culture and Cepheid’s ability to create an alternative space where dominant discourses can be challenged or ignored, the idea that Cepheid functions as a family is also reaffirmed by a particularly performative practice in which Cepheids participate: the art of storytelling. In *Storytelling in Daily Life*, Kristin M. Langellier and Eric E. Peterson note that “family is a human

communication practice—as much a way of ‘doing things with words’ as it is a set of ties and sentiments” (33). Cepheid functions as a family because its members live or spend much of their time together, because they are there for one another in times of pain and emergency, and because Cepheid is a place to which members can always return, even after they have left A&M. But Cepheid is also a family because members call it a family, and because storytelling in particular provides the context for understanding group relations and Cepheid culture over time. Langellier and Peterson note that “family storytelling is a survival strategy of small groups in which they articulate who they are to themselves, for themselves and the next generations, engaging memory and anticipation as embodied and material practices of human communication” (35). Through Cepheid storytelling, new members are taught what it means to be a Cepheid via the actions of their predecessors, and are encouraged to go out and do things worthy of creating new stories about.

“Storytime” is an important component of the weekly general meetings of Cepheid Variable, and Cepheid is the only student organization I have participated in which engages in such a practice, at least in such a ritualized and frequent manner. The first time I attended a Cepheid meeting and this bullet-point was announced, I was surprised to see a good ten to fifteen members clambering out of their seats to sit on the floor by the whiteboard in the front of the room, or when that space was filled, in the aisle between the two rows of chairs. Within minutes, a half-circle of expectant faces sat staring up at the designated storyteller for that particular meeting, and an uncharacteristic hush fell over the assembled crowd. From that moment, I knew storytelling was an

integral part of the Cepheid experience. This point was reaffirmed time and again throughout my participant-observation as members were encouraged to come to D-Raid or spend time in Studio 12 with the promise of more stories. The potential to be told stories by Elders was also mobilized as one of the major motivating factors for participation in fund-raising events – like helping run the Cepheid concession stand at football and basketball games – or other activities whose merit (or fun-factor) in their own right might not be immediately apparent to the membership.

Langellier and Peterson note that “people make sense of their experiences, claim identities, interact with each other, and participate in cultural conversations through storytelling” (1). In Cepheid, stories, during story time especially, serve the purpose of helping to define Cepheid identity through the antics of its past and current membership (i.e., “A Cepheid is the kind of person who...”). Through storytelling, new members are introduced to the culture of the group—what makes Cepheids different from other kinds of people – and its relationship to the administration of Texas A&M (and authority figures more generally). Additionally, many of the stories told are meant to be educational, providing humorous examples of what *not* to do in a given circumstance. Others exemplify what *to* do depending on individual proclivities and/or hubris, though the officers do not allow or condone official support for the most wild or questionably legal activities which could potentially be narrated in a Cepheid story.

When asked about the importance of storytelling in Cepheid, Scott noted:

the ↑heritage is important because it gives us something to ↑gather
a↑round
and
...

a *lot* of the stories that we tell
 ..
 ‘ou know
 like↑
 ...
 ...
 ↑severnty-five percent is true↑ but the rest is em↑bellished
 ummm
 just be↑cause that’s how Cepheid stories go↑
 but they ↑give us the ↑heroes to gather around
 [...]

 the ↑*old* ones
 the people that have ↑gone
 through the veil↑
 and have disa↑ppeared
 but are ↑still
there
 in our memory
 ...
 and *so*
 ...
 all those stories give us something ta as↑pire to
 something to ↑be. (11 March 2011)

Right away, Scott acknowledges the embellishment inherent in Cepheid storytelling, implying that a *good* Cepheid story is one with plenty of vivid imagery and detail in addition to its typically humorous content. As a result, those charged with passing down Cepheid stories are also granted a certain amount of poetic license with the past—the ability to exaggerate those moments in the story which are most likely to generate a reaction from the audience. I say “exaggerate” rather than “fabricate” because one of the hallmarks of Cepheid storytelling is that yes, members of Cepheid were actually crazy enough to do whatever is being narrated.

This practice of narrative exaggeration might have come about because, as Roger C. Schank and Tamara R. Berman note, “the best stories are those that have rich detail,

because they broaden the context to allow more listeners to find themselves in the stories” (310). In a given storytelling session, a Cepheid storyteller can add references to stories told at previous Cepheid meetings or to nerd/geek culture more generally in an attempt to make a given story more accessible to the current audience and their frames of reference, allowing the story to become personally meaningful to more of the seventy-odd members likely to attend the general meetings. The practice of embellishment, however, is also in line with the idea that “the emphasis on storytelling over story, on the evaluative over referential function, on performance over text, places issues of meaning and sensibility at the heart of family narrative” (Langellier and Peterson 40). While one of the functions of family storytelling is certainly that of relating chronology and biography, and of telling a story which will be meaningful to the current audience, a potentially more important function alluded to here is that of creating a sense of *who* a particular family is, and what makes them unique—including particular sensibilities and worldviews—and this can be seen in Cepheid storytelling as well.

This idea of performance being valued over text also meshes with a practice I observed many times throughout my participant observation: the tendency to put off the telling of certain stories because, while many members witnessed an event or have been told the story about it, a particular Cepheid tells that story “best.” While some stories can be told at anytime and by anyone, others are reserved for special occasions or deferred to a time and place when a specific individual is both available and willing to tell the story in question. And while there are a few stories which are off-limits for general telling, many are not and are still deferred – all because there is an understanding in Cepheid

that any story worth hearing is worth being told *well*. Additionally, when an old story is being told by a Cepheid for the first time, other (older) members are likely to interject during the telling, providing any details or embellishments the current storyteller has overlooked. This practice illuminates Richard Bauman's distinction between the narrated and narrative event in oral storytelling. Bauman argues that "it is the structures of signification in narrative that give coherence to events in our understanding, that enable us to construct in the interdependent process of narration and interpretation a coherent set of interrelationships that we call an 'event'" (5). The Elders of Cepheid recognize, even unconsciously, that *how* a story is told, and which elements of a narrative are included or excluded in a given telling, have a direct impact on the meaning which can be drawn from that narrative in a given moment and for a given audience. This practice also highlights the fact that style is as important as content in a Cepheid story, and that those who have a way with words and creating imagery will likely be called on to tell stories time and time again.

But the latter portion of Scott's comment on p. 73-74 illuminates perhaps an even more central component of Cepheid storytelling and an additional reason why Cepheids engage in the practice in the first place. Scott emphasizes that recalling the history of the organization allows current members to find or create personal heroes—models for their future selves. As Schank and Berman note, "the strongest stories are those in which listeners can see themselves in the role of the hero. The closer we can come to relating to the hero, the more personally relevant the story becomes, and the more likely we are to learn from it" (308). The ability to view oneself as a hero, or to be able to recognize that

others have blazed the path one wants to follow, is an especially important consideration in an organization which caters to nerds/geeks – individuals who potentially have not had many friends or might have difficulty fitting in socially. By serving as positive role models via storytelling, Elders in Cepheid can ensure that future generations of nerds/geeks, or at least the ones attending TAMU, can learn to embrace their own nerd/geek identities by example, as well as learning from the mistakes of the past.

Additionally, if it is true that “small group cultures survive to the extent that they keep information moving through generations,” then the creation of these Cepheid heroes also does part of the work of ensuring that the organization itself lives on by giving members something to aspire to be which is directly linked to the perpetuation of the organization’s group culture (68). Such a construction of Cepheid identity in itself is crucial because in an organization filled with individuals with interests as diverse as the members of Cepheid Variable, it is important to have something which brings *everyone* in the organization together and unites the members into a cohesive whole. Without a unifying force, as Cepheid Variable has grown and changed over the years it might have split into several organizations rather than one organization with many sub-committees. Scott identifies storytelling as that which brings Cepheids together and gives them something to gather around, often literally, as with the storytelling circle at Cepheid meetings.

In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz notes that “the field of utopian possibility is one in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity” (20). In Cepheid, the creation of heroes through storytelling

allows the members to honor the organization’s past while imagining a future in which they become the heroes of the next generation and earn their own place in the annals of Cepheid history. This desire is able to bring together a room full of individuals with diverse – if equally maligned – interests and provide them with something to work towards together. In this way, members of Cepheid don’t just get what members of other student organizations do – a group of people with similar interests with which to spend time and develop relationships. Cepheids also get a *family*, complete with a history and a heritage it is their duty to preserve and aspire to uphold.

Langellier and Peterson note that “the unique lived experience of family provides the enfamilied person with a biography that derives larger meanings from its location in the process of ordering activities in daily life (task-ordering) and the events of family history (content-ordering)” (115). In other words, storytelling is not just an event – it is a process, and one which is always in motion, as any given moment of interaction between Cepheids holds the potential to inspire the recollection of an old story, or the creation of a new one. Bauman’s work resonates here as well, highlighting “the narrated event as one dimension of a story’s meaning...emergent in performance” (6). In storytelling, the narrated and narrative events work together and inform each another, shaping both the kinds of stories which get told and the meanings those stories hold for those who hear them. Rephil made note of this phenomenon in our interview, saying:

Cepheid is
one of the
older
groups on campus
...
↑and one of the things that helped draw me in was

umm
 a ↑couple guys started telling me stories
 a lot of stories about their time in Cepheid
 and ↑Cepheid is all about the stories
 it's about↑
 the past↑ stories
 the
 the stories that happened last weekend
 and
 and↑
 the ↑stories that you know↑ are going to happen the next weekend after
 that. (26 April 2011)

For Rephil, then, part of the draw of Cepheid storytelling is its potential to create a sense of belonging through time. While the ability for new stories to be created is ever-present in the organization, Cepheids have been doing things worthy of storytelling throughout their history, and will continue to do so well into the future. Cepheid storytelling is the kind which can “remind us that life, like narrative, has a structure, that life can be told, that we can derive hope from our lives and insights that might teach us something joyful or painful about who we are and who we might become” (Dolan 152). Through listening to the stories of Cepheid Elders, both Scott and Rephil have caught glimpses of the kind of persons they could become, and have chosen to dedicate themselves to that vision through participation in Cepheid itself.

This kind of storytelling could also be especially meaningful for geeks and nerds who are not used to having their lives and experiences validated. Tocci notes that “the linkages and boundaries between traditionally ‘geeky’ fan groups may be blurry, but one thing that they may all have in common is a shared sense of marginalization and stigma” (56). Through storytelling, Cepheid provides its members with a way to recode their experiences as valuable and worth telling, and to hear about other geeks and nerds

socializing and having fun experiences. Storytelling can provide a means for mitigating low self-esteem and alienation by encouraging Cepheids to participate in the organization and to do things worthy of being transformed into a Cepheid story – one which can serve as an example to future generations.

Of course, no discussion of storytelling would be complete without some kind of analysis of one of the stories being told. The difficulty with attempting a content analysis of Cepheid stories, however, is that many center around the shenanigans of individuals who are or have been members of Cepheid. This often means that the actual details of the stories themselves revolve around events which have taken place outside of official Cepheid events. As a result, such stories can be (and often are) understood to “belong” to that individual – often to the extent that only the protagonist in the story or someone who witnessed the events in question are allowed to tell the tale. Such stories serve the purpose of outlining the type of person likely to become a Cepheid and providing the heroes around which, Scott notes, current Cepheids are able to gather or rally themselves. Another common subset of Cepheid stories are D-name stories, but again, these are generally told by either the Elder(s) who bestowed the D-name or the individual upon which said name was bestowed. While neither are hard and fast rules, they are followed enough of the time that honoring the storytelling culture of Cepheid and my own status as a participant-observer within it suggests I should not break them.

In addition to the content of many of the stories, the necessarily limited nature of my own ethnographic involvement in the organization has caused me to question my right to tell Cepheid stories. During my time in Cepheid, the designated storytellers

during general meetings have almost always been either Elders or officers. Even at D-raid, events, or parties, Elders are most likely to be the ones to both tell stories and to know the good ones to tell. The organizational expectation is that new members will consume stories and Elders will tell them; the privilege to listen to a particular story does not inherently bestow said listener with the right to tell that story later. Having attended my first Cepheid meeting in October 2010, I am a part of the youngest Cepheid generation despite my graduate student status. Thus, I have heretofore followed organizational expectations and merely *listened* to Cepheid stories – especially since even as a performer and Performance Studies scholar I have been continually impressed by the storytelling capabilities of many Cepheids: a possible by-product of participation in role-playing games which require the construction of narrative and the voicing of different characters.

Furthermore, the group dynamics of Cepheid Variable, including narrative events, are difficult for outsiders to understand; even members often don't quite "get" Cepheid until months of membership, and are even then hard-pressed to describe it to others. I have heard Cepheids describe the organization as "a family," "the people who don't belong anywhere else," "an individualistic, meritocratic cult," "semi-organized insanity," and "the Internet in real life," but none of these definitions, even, really cut to the heart of the matter. In fact, I think one of the reasons storytelling is so popular in Cepheid is that it provides a means for explaining the organization by example, and by showing the kinds of people who make up its membership. To complicate matters even further, as I have previously outlined, Cepheids don't have the best of reputations—often

being viewed as loud and rowdy or just plain crazy or weird – and when I began my participant-observation, the officers were reasonably concerned about how I, at that time an outsider, might portray their organization. When individuals are given D-names, for example, for doing something stupid, something awesome, or something stupidly awesome, the content of many Cepheid stories ends up being that which could only reaffirm the negative view of Cepheid if taken out of context and told to someone unfamiliar with any of the organization's membership. If Cepheid can be considered a family – a family of which I am now a part – and if “families are partisans of the ‘we,’ the good-of-the-many which subordinates individual to family interests,” then it is my methodological responsibility not to tell those stories which could paint Cepheids in a negative or questionable light (Langellier and Peterson 124).

Yet, Langellier and Peterson note that while “the task of the younger generation is to listen...they, too, may innovate and interpret information” (79). Keeping all the contextual and methodological considerations outlined above still in mind, I will reproduce the organizational dynamics of Cepheid as closely as is possible while also interpreting one of the stories which shapes them. The story I have chosen to analyze is one I have heard told the most frequently and in the most diverse circumstances during my participant-observation. While this story might have resurfaced recently, or might only be a favorite among the Cepheids with whom I most frequently associate, I have heard it frequently told to outsiders and potential members. For that reason, I believe it is a useful entre into Cepheid culture. To preface the story, it is important to note that one of the traditions of Cepheid is performing the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and one of

the sub-committees in Cepheid is devoted to a live cast. It is also important to note that being elected Chair of Cepheid Variable has been described as a game of “Not it!” partially because the Chair of Cepheid can expect, sooner rather than later, to get what is termed one of “those calls” from someone in the administration of A&M. One of “those calls” involves the caller asking, “Are you the Chair of the student organization Cepheid Variable?” to which the Chair is forced to respond, “Yes...why?” knowing that someone somewhere in the organization has done something which, if not “wrong,” is in the least unusual or strange, and now the Chair is going to have to try to explain it and make amends. There is a sub-category of Cepheid stories allocated to stories about “those calls,” and the story I am about to tell is one of them. The story goes like this, and I hope I can do it justice.

A long time ago, Cepheid used to perform *Rocky* in a local outdoor amphitheatre called The Glade.¹⁸ In the back, where the dressing rooms were located and props could be stored, there was a refrigerator which could be used by whoever happened to be renting the amphitheatre at the time. I believe it was fall, and the call might have even occurred after the annual Halloween showing of *Rocky* (reserving my own right to embellishment). The Chair was minding his/her own business, and maybe even doing homework or chatting with some fellow Cepheids in the basement of the MSC when he/she receives a telephone call. “Hello?” The voice on the other end of the line says, “Yes, Hello. Am I speaking to the Chair of [insert a pause and the shuffling of papers here] ‘Cepheid Variable?’” Now the Chair moves to some place private and replies, “...Yes...Why?” The voice continues, “Are there any Satanists in your organization?”

Now there is a definite pause, perhaps accompanied by a sharp intake of breath, as the Chair panics and tries to run quickly through a list of the current membership. One can always count on a good mix of Christians, pagans, and Atheists in Cepheid, as well as probably some Wiccans and maybe even a couple Buddhists. Keep in mind that this is Texas and that gives an idea about the kind of people likely to join Cepheid Variable. Nobody really asks questions about such things or attempts to keep track. Not wanting to inadvertently lie, and in a desperate attempt to remain democratic, the Chair carefully responds, “I can neither confirm nor deny the existence of any Satanists in Cepheid Variable. [Pause as he/she attempts to steel his/her nerves for whatever might be coming next]. Why?” The voice on the other end of the line replies, “Someone found a dead cat in the freezer out at The Grove and called to complain about it, and we were wondering if it belongs to you.” The Chair manages to choke out something like, “I’ll have to get back to you” and hangs up. The Chair immediately locates the director of the cast of *Rocky* and asks if they know anything about a dead cat in the freezer at The Grove. The director responds, “Oh yeah, so-and-so opened the door and found it. We passed it around and had a good laugh about it and then put it back. Why do you ask?” to which the Chair replies, “And you didn’t think to *tell* anybody about it?!” Obviously, the answer to that question was no, and I don’t know if the administration ever found out whose cat it was or what had happened. But that’s the story about how Cepheids got blamed by the administration for something that – for just this once – they didn’t actually do.

The story of the dead cat in the freezer is tied thematically to other stories about calls various Chairs of Cepheid have received from the administration of Texas A&M, and it is a part of a larger rhetoric about how the administration, historically, only barely tolerates the organization's existence, at least according to Cepheid lore. The story also highlights the way that such an outsider status functions as a source of pride in Cepheid. In our interview, Bill recalled that even in the 1970s the administration didn't know what to make of Cepheid, saying,

We weren't what they were ↑used to
 [...]
 Their idea was that
 students were going to be the kind of guys who came in
 and mostly guys↑
 who came in with suits
 or ties
 or Corps uniforms
 and had a
 very linear
 very staid programming event
 and
 not really pushing creativity
 you know
 and-and ↑weirdness. (28 Sept. 2010)

Because members of Cepheid Variable developed a reputation for being weird and not following the unwritten rules and expectations the administration had for student organizations at the outset, they have become over the years the scapegoat for anything unusual or inexplicable – like a dead cat in the freezer at The Grove. And most Cepheids will admit this reputation isn't entirely unfounded. As it is, even the Chair couldn't be 100% sure that there wasn't a Satanist or someone similar somewhere in Cepheid responsible for the cat ending up where it did.

So, it is possible that this story has become popular because it is able to serve multiple purposes simultaneously. The dead cat story illustrates the type of individuals who make up Cepheid, the relationship dynamic between the organization and the university, and the type of shenanigans members of the organization are likely to get into, allowing individuals to make an educated decision about whether these are the kind of people they want to be around. The story also reaffirms pride in the outsider status Cepheids have cultivated over the years, and reflects the aesthetic of humor which dominates much of Cepheid culture. The fact that the Cepheid who found the cat felt the need to show it to his/her friends, for example, points to a part of Cepheid culture which takes a carnivalesque pleasure in the humor of the grotesque. Additionally, the storyteller alternately portrays worry about how the situation is going to pan out for Cepheid, and pride in Cepheid's ability to be outrageous and keep the administration on their toes, unable to anticipate what might come next. Finally, because this is a case where Cepheid did not do it, the organization is also able to establish proof that Cepheids are not as bad as others think they are.

Because I have heard this story so often during my participant-observation, it is possible to categorize it as one of the current "family classics" of Cepheid Variable. Langellier and Peterson note that through the self-focusing and (relative) stabilizing which occurs as family classics are told and re-told, these stories "can anchor a family's definition and bolster cultural survival" as well as serving to "naturalize family identity as more singular, solid, consensual, and 'clean' than the messiness of family life" (56). The dead cat story can be seen to serve such a purpose by outlining the members as

unfairly accused victims and as victorious against the accusations of their oppressor, as well as highlighting the protections offered to members of Cepheid, shown here by the efforts of the Chair to get both sides of the story, work to make amends, and maintain a decent rapport between Cepheid and the administration. Any stories told about Cepheids getting into trouble end with Cepheid being victorious in the end, one way or another, reaffirming the resilience of the organization and leaving its members free to be themselves, confident that Cepheid will continue to prevail, one way or another.

But lest I leave a picture of Cepheid storytelling as something uncontested or only interpreted in a positive light, I was also made aware during my participant-observation of the fear that Cepheid traditions and history were in danger of being lost. Speaking of story time in particular, and the 2010-2011 Chair of the organization, Lee, Alyssa noted:

my sophomore year↑
 there was always an Elder present
 and they
 always told a story either
 from
 uhh
 their time↑
 ...
 which would be anywhere from
 two
 taa
 eight years ago↑
 ...
 or
 froomm
 ...
 before any of our time
 [...]
 and
 you know

occasionally
 if something really, *really* good happened
 that resulted in a \uparrow *D-name*
 ...
 or just
 a hilarious \uparrow story
 ...
 they would tell that at story time
 and
 uhmm
 ...
 ...
 it's kind of frustrating because Lee
 I don't \uparrow know if Lee
knows
 ...
 a lot of the stories \uparrow
 so he ends up telling things that happened more recently \uparrow
 and that
 he thinks are funny
 but
 they're not really
 ...
 story time material. (10 March 2010)

Here, Alyssa outlines several elements she feels are integral to the storytelling tradition of Cepheid Variable, including *who* ought to tell the stories (preferably an Elder) and *what* content is worthy of a story time narrative (organizational history and stories hilarious enough to potentially be added to that canon in the future). In their work, Langellier and Peterson develop a theory of task ordering based on a three-generational system where “the middle generation incurs the greatest responsibility for cultural transmission and greatest risk of loss. If that generation fails to retrieve information, a family loses its sense of heritage, and the three-generational structure is collapsed to two generations who can only innovate family culture” (79). Alyssa suggests that Lee, by telling stories based on recent events, became lax in his duties as a member of the middle

generation, contributing to the possibility that the newer members of Cepheid would lose their sense of the organization's heritage.

Additionally, Alyssa's comment that Lee only tells stories "he thinks are funny" implies that while humor might be one of the criteria of Cepheid storytelling, it is not the most important. Returning to the dead cat story for a moment, it seems that the most effective Cepheid stories are those able to merge humor with a larger lesson. Cepheid stories, then, are meant to be teaching tools, whether they provide a life lesson in general, or a teach members something about Cepheid specifically. Langellier and Petersone note that "putting together family history is polyvocal and contested," revealing "an ongoing tension between information and communication and between personal and collective family history" (67). Just such a tension can be found in arguments about what kinds of stories are worthy of story time, and in who gets to make those decisions in the first place. I would argue that the fact that storytelling is an important enough part of Cepheid culture to warrant the kind of critique Alyssa provides means her fears are necessarily unfounded, and that the history of Cepheid will never be lost so long as a portion of the membership are willing to fight for it and to make their voices heard.

That Alyssa is nostalgic for those Cepheid stories which occurred "before any of our time" illustrates the power the longevity of the organization itself holds for many of its membership, and their desire for that past to be honored. It is important to note here that the current Chair of Cepheid, Scott, is known as a veritable repository for Cepheid lore, having been told many of the old stories by Cepheid Elders. Along with the focus

on the importance of Cepheid's role as a family, something else Scott has brought back to Cepheid is precisely the kind of storytelling Alyssa feared would be lost. Langellier and Peterson go on to say that "against the forces of coherence and closure, family storytelling remains open to the contingencies and messiness of ongoing lives" (67).

While not all members of Cepheid might agree about its storytelling practices, and while not all officers will approach the storytelling portion of meetings in the same way, I have no doubt that Cepheids will continue to do things worthy of great stories. As a result, while the particulars of Cepheid storytelling might ebb and flow, as long as Cepheid is considered a family, the tradition itself will need to remain.

Jill Dolan notes that storytelling "makes the audience the origin of the utopian performative, who can gesture toward a better world by showing up to watch, to listen, to be together, to be moved, to watch each other respond to a performance that creates history from our various experiences" (Dolan 75). As evidenced by the rush to the front of the meeting room when storytime is announced, it has always been clear to me that Cepheids value the stories they are told, and the potential which can be found in them. By spending time together in storytelling, by crafting both a history and a sense of family unity, by gesturing toward the creation of a space in which uniqueness is something to be proud of, Cepheid Variable creates a utopian space on the campus Texas A&M which ensures that the Aggies who have no place else to go will always be able to feel welcome.

Conclusions

Through organizational practices founded in sound and storytelling, members of Cepheid Variable are able to create a unique Cepheid culture and reinforce Cepheid's role as a queer nerd family on the Texas A&M campus. Though the organization brings together individuals with a variety of interests and passions, Cepheids are able to unite by learning to take pride in their weirdness, resisting conventional norms for behavior and forming intense personal relationships as a result. Speaking of the Cepheid family, Tray noted that:

even if↑ we don't have anything else↑ in ↑common
 the fact that we don't quite↑ fit in
 anywhere else↑
 ...
 sort of
 ...
 ...
 brings us together
 and in some↑ ways that's↑—
 that oughta↑ be
 a recipe
 for
 us
 completely falling apart↑
 but in↑stead
 it actually *works*
 it's sort of↑ a constantly reoccurring miracle. (26 April 2011)

While Tray recognizes that loving someone does not always mean you can stand to be around them all the time, she also knows that in spite of their personal differences, Cepheids will be able to be there for each other when it counts. At the end of his dissertation, Tocci argues that the true “revenge of the nerds” would be the ability to create “an increasing sense of belonging, a personal sense of validity, perhaps even a

gradual creeping out of insulated spaces...not necessarily a force to dismantle or oppose dominant ideology in most cases, but a space within it or beside it, where members feel free to act silly, celebrate feeling sappy, and indulge in being brainy” (400). The “constantly reoccurring miracle” of Cepheid Variable is that those who don’t quite “fit in” will always have someplace to call home at A&M. This doesn’t mean that the Aggie ethos will ever be destroyed by Cepheid, or even that Cepheid could exist without it, as it would be naïve to suppose the Cepheid notions of “tradition” and “family” come from anywhere but the heart of Texas A&M itself. Yet neither of those words connotes quite the same feeling inside a Cepheid meeting as they do elsewhere on the A&M campus. If any lesson, then, can be learned from the nerds/geeks of Cepheid Variable, it would be their ability to turn what are often considered the most conservative attributes of Texas A&M into a welcoming queer nerd family, using performances to create traditions it is hoped will be as long-lasting as the campus itself.

Notes

¹ While the official name of the organization is “Cepheid Variable,” the short-hand form “Cepheid” is more commonly used by its members, especially amongst themselves. Members of the organization also commonly refer to themselves and others as “Cepheids,” and this term is a marker of initiation into the group (i.e., just coming to a few meetings doesn’t make you “a Cepheid”; rather, you’ll know you are one when you start getting invited to more and more outside events, or else when someone addresses you as such).

² It is a Cepheid tradition that all events begin at a time in which the numbers add up to 14. When I first joined the organization, the general meetings were at 8:33pm (8+3+3=14), but were later moved to 8:06pm (8+0+6=14). Members will often correct themselves—or one another—if someone slips and says an event is starting at 5pm, for example, and say, “Oh, that was very un-14 of me. I meant 5:09”). This tradition stems from the curse of 14, which I will save you from by not saying any more about it.

³ An example of this was the creation in fall 2011 of the Gentleman’s Discourse subcommittee. Gentleman’s Discourse is devoted, among other things, to “the consumption of highest quality teas and other beverages; lively discussions of topics of great import to a Gentleman; the wearing of fineries from the local haberdasher and optician; and, exotic wonders of the Orient.” Female Cepheids are allowed to attend meetings of the Gentleman’s Discourse, but only if they wear a fake moustache. The Cepheid who

applied to run this subcommittee later admitted he meant it as a joke, but the Chair liked the idea so much he signed off on it anyway, to the joy of many.

⁴ This tradition is called “D-raid” in reference to the movie *Animal House*, the watching of which is a part of the initiation of Freshman into Cepheid. This is in part because past Cepheids were inspired to create both “D-raid” and “D-names” (nicknames given to Cepheid members to commemorate a particularly awesome and/or stupid event, because people cannot remember your actual name, or to compensate for common names) after watching the film (and also because it is just a really cool movie).

⁵ Studio 12 is a room with couches and tables located in the basement of the Commons dorms where Cepheids can converge at almost any point of the day or night to hang out, converse, or play table-top and/or video games together. Cepheid Variable used to claim a section of tables in the Memorial Student Center (or MSC) for a similar purpose, but that building was under construction for the duration of my participant-observation. I have heard older Cepheids lament time and time again the loss of the MSC, recalling how much better it was than Studio 12, which makes me sorry that I missed out on experiencing it myself.

⁶ Cepheid Variable has been a TAMU student organization since 1969. (<http://cephvar.tamu.edu/>)

⁷ The literature review found in this dissertation is quite exhaustive, and I believe Tocci’s analysis of nerd/geek culture to be the seminal one to date. While not obvious from the title, his project involved a multi-site ethnography of both on-line and face-to-face participant-observation. As Cepheid Variable likewise melds virtual and “real life” experiences, I draw heavily from Tocci’s work in my own analysis.

⁸ Due to the constraints of this research project, I have chosen to refrain from analyzing the intersectionality of identities at play in Cepheid Variable. For analyses of nerd/geek culture read through the lenses of race and gender, see the work of Mary Bucholtz or Lori Kendall.

⁹ Due to the overlap between “nerd” and “geek” identities, coupled with the contested definitions of both terms, I will use the inclusive terminology “nerd/geek” here. Tocci uses “geek/nerd” to a similar effect in his work, but I have heard more Cepheids self-identify as “nerds” than “geeks,” so I choose to put that term first in my own analysis. In moments of analysis of works focused solely on nerds or geeks, I will mirror the author’s terminology.

¹⁰ The interview transcription key can be located in the nomenclature.

¹¹ According to their website (www.sca.org/), the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) is “an international organization dedicated to researching and re-creating the arts and skills of pre-17th-century Europe” where “members, dressed in clothing of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, attend events which feature tournaments, royal courts, feasts, dancing, various classes & workshops, and more.” Camarilla (<http://camarilla.white-wolf.com/>) is a live-action role-playing game based on World of Darkness.

¹² An Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channel provides a place for text-based on-line messaging on a group level, rather than between two people (like AIM or Yahoo Instant Messaging). A Ventrilo Server performs a similar function, but is normally used so that a group of gamers playing a multiplayer video game can talk to one another. Additionally, Ventrilo allows for voice as well as text-based chatting.

¹³ The Cepheid Variable annual convention, AggieCon, is the longest-running student organized convention, and one of the longer-running sci-fi/fantasy conventions in the United States. AggieCon celebrated its 43rd year in 2012. In addition to participation in various sub-committees, Cepheids devote

themselves to fundraising and planning for the event each year and are required to volunteer in various positions during the weekend of the con itself.

¹⁴ Graduating from Texas A&M University doesn't mean one's membership in Cepheid Variable need end. "Elder" is the designation developed to label Cepheids who have "passed through the veil" (i.e., graduated from or otherwise left A&M—even if they have stuck around College Station). Elders are also often active on (or at least a member of) the Cepheid Variable list-serv and/or Facebook group. Occasionally, members who have not yet graduated have Elder status bestowed upon them; it is rare, and generally either means they have done some extra-special work for Cepheid in their time or that some Freshman just got confused about what an Elder is. There is also a distinction for "Elder God," which I believe refers to any of the founding members of the organization, but this definition seems even more highly contested than that of Elder.

¹⁵ Aggie Muster is an annual Texas A&M tradition, taking place on April 21. According to TAMU's website, (<http://aggietraditions.tamu.edu/remember/muster.html>) "the Muster ceremony consists of an address by a keynote speaker, the reading of poems, followed by the Roll Call for the Absent. The Roll Call honors Aggies that have fallen since the last Muster roll was read. As the names are read, a friend or family member answers 'Here', and a candle is lit to symbolize that while those Aggies are not present in body, they will forever remain with us in Aggie Spirit." The Cepheid Muster will consist of a panel at AggieCon 43 where those Cepheids who knew Muffin can gather together to tell stories, honoring his memory and celebrating his life.

¹⁶ Some D-names (see note 4) catch on better than others, and sometimes, a D-name will come to supersede a Cepheid's birth name. In the cases where I was introduced to a Cepheid by their D-name, and where that name is used in lieu of their birth name in general conversation, I will refer to them by that name in my work. Such is the case with Rephil, Tray, and Bandcamp.

¹⁷ "Spawn" is the term used to describe the children born of a union of two Cepheids. Cepheid spawn are considered members of the organization from birth and/or conception. In other words, Cepheids "spawn" more Cepheids.

¹⁸ No one who tells the story remembers exactly when these events took place (or else finds the year an unimportant detail), but to give you an idea, The Glade was closed in 1993, as per the Cepheid Wiki.

THE GLBT AGGIES

When looking for queer utopias on the Texas A&M University campus, the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Aggies, or GLBTA, would seem to be the most obvious example. The GLBTA was the first student organization at Texas A&M University to have a mission specific to issues related to sexual orientation.¹ While there are many directions my analysis of the GLBT Aggies could take, I choose to focus on the intersection of performance, utopia, and counterpublic identity. I will begin by exploring what the GLBT Aggies claims to provide its membership in theory, juxtaposed with what the organization actually accomplishes in practice, arguing that its potential utopian goals are challenged by the diversity present within the LGBTQ community itself. I will then examine a moment of crisis the LGBTQ community at Texas A&M faced in spring 2011. I argue that this moment provides a means for illuminating several modes of discourse about sexual identity present on the A&M campus and will also facilitate an interrogation of the way GLBTA members and their allies publically performed their identities in that moment of crisis as a means for furthering several political agendas.

My relationship as a scholar and participant-observer within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) community at Texas A&M University is more complex and fraught than my relationship with either the Tim Miller Workshop or Cepheid Variable. I had located and contacted the GLBTA through their Student Activities website the summer before I began my graduate school career, and

joined the organization before I knew what my thesis research topic would be. I also joined the Executive Board of the GLBTA during my participant-observation, serving as the Graduate Student Liaison in the spring of 2011. My reasons for resigning from that Executive position before the fall of 2011 are complex, and will not be a part of this analysis. My personal stakes in the LGBTQ community and the relationships I forged within the GLBTA in the early weeks of my first semester at Texas A&M University are what first drew me to the concept of utopia, and for better or worse, are what ultimately made this project possible. As a Feminist and Queer Studies scholar, I prefer the formulation LGBTQ to GLBT when describing the queer community. Putting the “L” before the “G” places emphasis on the female experiences of a community where white gay men are often the most visible and adding a “Q” for Queer/Questioning at the end opens up a space for individuals whose sexual identities are still in flux or who feel constricted by the connotations conjured by the categories “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” or “transgender.” In this analysis, I will use the acronym LGBTQ to describe the queer community at Texas A&M, and will use GLBT to refer to the GLBT Aggies as an organization, or where that is the formulation an interlocutor used to describe the queer community in our interview.

The GLBT Aggies in Theory and in Practice

What is currently the GLBTA was formerly known as Gay Student Services, which gained legal status and official recognition from Texas A&M University after fighting a 9-year court battle, finally winning its appeal at the Supreme Court level in

1985 (Wiessler). Since then, the organization has attempted to increase the diversity of sexual identities it addresses, evidenced most obviously by the name change itself.

Despite the longevity of the GLBTA, however, Texas A&M continues to be known by its conservative and strongly heteronormative reputation. As a result, LGBTQ students often admit feeling marginalized on campus, especially those majoring in the hard sciences or engineering, a sentiment reinforced during many conversations throughout my participant-observation. GLBTA members are well-aware of the campus climate, and the organization's mission is to "provide support for all gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals...to provide educational information...[and] to create opportunities for welcoming, safe, and supportive social gatherings that strive to minimize the fear of harassment or exposure" ("Purpose"). To achieve these goals, the organization holds a meeting every Thursday at 6:30pm, followed by a group dinner at a LGBTQ-friendly restaurant in the Bryan-College Station area. In accordance with the organization's mission, the content of the weekly meetings alternates between socials, guest speakers, and opportunities for the membership to share their own experiences and histories as LGBTQ individuals.

Part of the reason for the three-fold mission of the GLBTA is its long-time position as *the resource* for LGBTQ students at Texas A&M. This position is reflected first and foremost by the inclusion of "Aggie" at the end of the organization's name—a choice which literally announces that the group exists to serve any and all of the GLBT Aggies at A&M. Now, certainly not all students at Texas A&M self-identify as Aggies or concern themselves with the university's traditions, a point to which I will return. Yet,

many GLBT Aggies desperately seek any sense of connection to a community of like-minded individuals, and once they find the GLBTA, it can seem almost too good to be true. Many newcomers reported being shocked that such a group could and did exist at A&M, whether they found it by stumbling upon the GLBTA's Student Activities listing, walking past its resource table on campus during Coming Out or GLBT Health Week, or hearing about it from a professor, classmate, or friend.

It is important also to consider that, just as the mission of the GLBTA is diverse, the reasons individuals have for joining often vary as well. Some interlocutors reported joining in order to make new friends. Others came to the GLBTA to learn about the LGBTQ community, in order to better understand both their own experience and their position within a marginalized identity category. Still others joined for political reasons, as a means of reaffirming their support for LGBTQ equality. But whatever the initial impetus for membership, many members reported finding that their position relative to the LGBTQ community itself shifted over time, with what started as a social interest turning political, or the desire to learn more about the LGBTQ community leading to the forging of friendships with other members of that community. Furthermore, it is possible for one individual to seek out the GLBTA for a variety of reasons, and without a clear understanding of which component of its mission statement s/he finds most resonant. Such was the case with Jude, who told me he joined the GLBTA because:

I wa↑nted to knoow↑
 ...
 everything about the gay move↑ment
 I wanted to know what it meant to be gay
 [...]
 and

to fi↑nd a place where I be↑longed
 because I had ne↑ver
 really
 fit in↑
 in many places in my life before
 ...
 and
 I was also looking for a fri↑end
 group
 because
 I was new to college at the time↑. (3 Sept. 2011)²

Here, Jude references the political/historical, educational, and social aspects of initiation into the LGBTQ community in a single train of thought, and such a combination of needs and desires might be one reason why the GLBTA attempts to sustain a three-fold mission statement. Certainly, it could be argued that it is difficult enough for any student organization to attempt to meet *one* goal, whether that of socialization, community service, or education. By attempting to do all three, in addition to providing a safe space for an otherwise marginalized identity, the resources of the GLBTA are often stretched to capacity.

But what in one sense could be interpreted as the GLBTA's greatest weakness can be seen in another sense as a contributing factor to the organization's longevity and continuing importance to the campus life of Texas A&M. In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz refers to Ernst Bloch's notion that "there is no such thing as utopia without multiple goals" (Bloch and Adorno 12). Rather than being a hindrance, it could be that the three-fold mission of the GLBTA is what has actually allowed the organization to flourish and grow. Multiple goals encourage not only individuals with a diversity of needs but a diversity of individuals to invest their time and energy into the

GLBTA, as well as ensuring that, as members' interests and investments change over time, they will still be able to relate to the organization's mission. Muñoz goes on to explain that "utopia is not about simply achieving happiness or freedom; utopia is in fact a casting of a picture of potentiality and possibility" (125). By offering support, education, and opportunities for connection and community-building to its members, the GLBTA is able to create a vision of an A&M where GLBT Aggies will be valued, included, and understood by the larger campus community in a way that is not currently possible. I argue that this vision of hope is what allows the GLBTA to do much of the positive work it does on the Texas A&M campus, but that despite the multiplicity of its goals, the utopia the GLBTA posits is still in many ways ultimately unable to fulfill the promise it makes to its membership.

One of the recurring tensions within the GLBTA during my participant-observation was likewise observed by Patrick Dilley during his own research on gay student organizations, *Queer Man on Campus*. Dilley observed among his interlocutors a "conflict between personal goals (usually for socialization) and political goals (usually for inclusion of and equity for non-heterosexual students)" (203). Similarly, Mickey noted of the GLBTA that:

I think↑
 most of the people
 that it appeals to
 ...
 is usually students that are *out*
 majority of the people who come are out
 ...
 and
 ...
 I don't know how else to say it

other than
 very *gay*
 and very
 um
 like
 most of them have already embraced gay culture
 and their gay identity
 and umm
 that's great↑
 but I think those people that need the GLBT-the GLBTA more↑
 are those people that *aren't* completely comfortable
 with their gay identity
 and need that safe space. (3 March 2011)

Here, Mickey references one of the key issues facing the members of the GLBT Aggies, along with any other gay student organization: the question of “out” status, and how an organization like the GLBTA could serve both “very gay” and still closeted constituencies of students effectively. Dilley argues that “for students viewing themselves and their lives as gay, the integration of sexual orientation into their identity fostered a need to become involved in the local community” (11). But Mickey’s comments beg the question: what of those students who have not yet completed that process of integration? If the current trajectory of the GLBTA is most beneficial to, or most welcoming to, students who already understand and on some level accept themselves as gay, many members of the GLBTA have expressed a fear that those students who are still questioning their sexual identities will be left without a community or resources to fall back on, when it is those very students who have the greatest need of the safe space the GLBTA attempts to provide. It is certainly true that “out” students have the most to lose regarding stigmatization, discrimination, and potential acts of violence. It is also worth noting, however, that college is still a place where many

LGBTQ youth interrogate their sexuality for the first time, and that coming out is complex enough process without the added pressure of being out serving as a prerequisite to having allies or support.

This question of how the GLBTA could meet the needs of students at many different points in their own individual processes of self-discovery becomes infinitely more important when set in relief to the conservative campus culture of Texas A&M University itself. While many A&M students were brought up in conservative environments, some LGBTQ students experience homophobia for the first time or the most strongly at A&M, and find themselves ill-equipped to deal with the resulting mental and emotional anguish. Such was the case with Karla, who said:

So when I came to A&M
and I experienced
like
harassment
and discrimination
and bullying
...
that was the *first* ↑time
that I had experienced it
...
so it was-it was like
to me that was like
me being
like a 13-year-old kid↑
experiencing it
...
but only I was 18
...
because I felt like I was so sheltered
in little bubbly San Antonio. (30 Nov. 2010)

Situations like these leave the GLBTA in a double-bind: without a focus on visibility, LGBTQ students at Texas A&M will remain ignorant of the resources the organization

has to offer. But participation in events where being “out and proud” is a necessary performance might seem inadvisable to members like Karla, who are already feeling vulnerable and stigmatized by their collegiate peers. Many LGBTQ students have restricted options and complex reasons for staying at A&M in the face of discrimination and homophobia; others come and desire to stay in order to resist the campus culture, making A&M more welcoming for those who attend in the future. The GLBTA often ends up at the crux of such debates, unable to meet the needs of both those who desire to be left alone and those who want to fight. Karla herself ultimately took the second route, serving as the 2010-2011 President of the GLBTA. But Karla also used her position to attempt to make the GLBTA more welcoming “no matter who you are, no matter where you’re coming from, no matter what you believe, no matter what you want, no matter how out you are” (30 November 2010).

The GLBTA has attempted to bridge the gap between visibility and protection through events like staging a sit-in in Zachary, an Engineering building where many GLBTA members reported experiencing harassment and name-calling. By inviting those members who felt comfortable to study and/or eat lunch in Zachary while wearing rainbow gear or clothing with LGBTQ-friendly slogans, the organization hoped to prevent LGBTQ students from having experiences like Karla’s in the first place. But just as we can understand utopia itself “as processual, as an index to the possible,” so are the efforts of the GLBTA always incomplete (Dolan 13). As much as the campus climate of homophobia at Texas A&M might be seen to shift in small ways as more and more students are exposed to their LGBTQ peers on campus, the members of the GLBTA are

always fighting an uphill battle, and must continually keep in mind the closeted students who might not feel safe enough to be publicly associated with the GLBTA.

Because of the stigma its members experience, the GLBTA can be seen to fit Michael Warner's definition of a *counterpublic*. Warner notes that "the subordinate status of a counterpublic does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways its members' identities are formed and transformed. A hierarchy or stigma is the assumed background of practice. One enters at one's own risk" (*Publics and Counterpublics* 87). Through participation in an organization like the GLBTA, LGBTQ students are able to learn, as Jude articulated, "what it meant to be gay," and to create their own sense of queer identity based on that new knowledge. But this education does not come without a price; once LGBTQ students have formed a gay identity and perform it publicly, they risk becoming subject to verbal attacks like "faggot" or "dyke." Moreover, the stigma linked with the GLBTA extends to *anyone* associated with the organization, regardless of their sexual orientation. Jon, one of the straight members of the GLBTA, related his experience continually "coming out" as an ally. Speaking of his fellow GLBTA members, Jon noted that:

it's less that they
 uhhm
 ...
 you know
 that they think ↑ I'm gay because I *act* gay or whatever
 but more that they're just *surprised* that
 ...
 you know
someone
 ...
 being
 like

you know
 someone
 that has all this *privilege* quote unquote
 would be
 would put[↑] themselves in the environment[↑]
 [...]

so the *fact*[↑] that it was so shocking
 was kind of a
 big[↑]
 like
 eye-opener
 and like[↑]
 ultimately disappointment[↑]
 that
 you know
 it would be[↑] such a surprising thing[↑]
 because it really *shows*
 the amount of
 like[↑]
 ...
 negativity. (7 April 2011)

Jon did not fully recognize the severity of the stigma his LGBTQ peers faced until he experienced their shock at his willingness to be associated with them, which left him open to encountering some portion of that same stigma himself. The “privilege” of Jon’s own heterosexuality could easily have kept him from further associating with the GLBTA’s members. Instead, he was moved by their plight and it only strengthened his resolve to remain an ally and advocate for LGBTQ equality.

Yet, Warner argues that a counterpublic’s members “mark themselves off unmistakably from any general or dominant public” and “are understood to be not merely a subset of the public, but constituted through a conflictual relation” to it (*Publics and Counterpublics* 84-85). In this sense, the GLBTA’s relationship to counterpublic status becomes more complicated. Jude argued that:

the GLBTA has always existed to make sure↑
 [...]

the members of the GLBT community
 ↑know
 [...]

they have ↑someplace
 where they can
 feel like they
 belong
 if they don't feel
 like
 they
 belong↑
 to the university at large. (3 Sept. 2011)

This statement implies that at least some portion of the members of the LGBTQ community at A&M do *not* feel like they belong to the larger A&M community—a reality the experiences of Karla and others would corroborate. Certainly, conflict with the more conservative portions of the Texas A&M campus could be considered a perpetual part of the GLBTA's existence. Yet, the inclusion of "Aggie" in the organization's name, as well as their transformation of the Aggie Honor Code in the organization's Safe Zone Agreements simultaneously suggests a desire to be incorporated *into* the larger public of Texas A&M University, even if that desire is by no means universal.³ In this sense, the GLBTA exists in a liminal space—relegated to a counterpublic status its members are alternately proud of and desirous to change.

The position of the GLBTA is made that much more complicated when one considers that not all of its membership agree with the organization's appeal to the Aggie identity, and would prefer the organization take a more firmly counterpublic stance to the larger campus culture. Tia remarked that:

While the GLBTA

is
 kind of represented
 ↑ as a
separate
 kind of u↑topian place
 be↑cause
 of the whole
 sexual
 orien↑tation aspect
 ...
 it's not *truly* that↑
 because
 ...
 we still are
 kind of po↑sitioned
 as
 a
 only *white*
 organization
 [...]

it's Texas A&M
 and
 you feel
 already
 kind of ↑isolated
 by-by that ↑culture
 and then
 you come to someplace
 where
 you're supposed to be accepted
 because you ↑are like them
 and
 you get there
 and
 it doesn't even ↑look like it. (23 Feb. 2011)

In addition to Mickey's observation that the GLBTA best serves the "very gay," as one of the few black members of the GLBTA, Tia argues here that the organization is also aligned most closely with the predominately white culture of Texas A&M itself. In our interview, Tia admitted to hating A&M's focus on tradition, saying that she came to get

an education and not to be an Aggie. She went on to say of the GLBTA, “I ↑want us to not be just a gay version of the Texas A&M environment” (23 Feb. 2011). While some members of the GLBTA appeal to the Aggie Core Values of integrity and respect in an attempt to gain acceptance of the LGBTQ community on campus, other members would rather the organization accept its marginalized status and work harder to address the needs of those who do not want to be Aggies.⁴

Tia’s comments align her position with Austin Sarat’s notion that

...racial, cultural, or identity groups often do not confront issues of recognition and accommodation in a unified fashion, and that demands for recognition and accommodation, put forward by some as the minimum condition for genuine inclusion in a community, may be seen by others as a form of blackmail masquerading as victimization. (153-54)

By questioning the usefulness of the GLBTA’s attempts towards inclusion in the Aggie family, Tia illuminates the complexity of the very idea of resistance and explores the ways demanding inclusion can be perceived as both a weak and threatening stance, depending on both an individual’s position in the power hierarchy and their own placement within a given culture. Tia’s comments also more closely align the GLBTA with Muñoz’s understanding of utopia. Muñoz argues that “utopia offers us a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*” (35 – emphasis original). Tia sees the GLBTA, to a certain extent, as attempting to recreate the culture of Texas A&M, and striving only to expand the “Aggie” identity far enough to incorporate LGBTQ students. Yet, rather than disregarding the organization altogether, Tia argued that “The GLBTA could be so much better than what it is...And that’s all I want – like I want the GLBTA to do so much more ↑” (23 Feb. 2011). By asking that the

GLBTA do *more* or *better* than it currently is, Tia could be seen as attempting to create a utopia within a utopia. In this way, her vision of a GLBTA which can meet the needs of a more diverse pool of A&M students actually reaffirms the GLBTA's utopian status at Texas A&M.

If the GLBTA can be seen to fail some portion of the LGBTQ community at Texas A&M, however, including those who are not white or fully out, it is important also to remember Muñoz's assertion that "utopia can never be prescriptive and is *always* destined to fail" (173 – emphasis mine). But Muñoz goes on to argue that this failure is only useful when potential is located within it, and when queer individuals realize that failure can be used to escape the constricting worldview of heteronormativity. In other words, the acceptance that one is not and will never be "normal" is a part of creating and accepting a queer identity. In this sense, being queer means always already having failed in the eyes of those who would demand allegiance to a normative standard of behavior. Similarly, Tia's comments suggest that the GLBTA will continue to fail certain segments of the LGBTQ community as long as they cling to the Aggie identity and the normative worldview it represents. But because tradition and the Aggie ethos are so central to campus life at Texas A&M, disregarding them altogether is not as easy as it sounds. When asked about the "Aggie" in the GLBTA, Karla explained:

it's like
 why are we here?
 why are we part of the organization?
 well, because we're gay
 ...
 but why are we really a part of the organization?
 ..
 because we're at A&M

and if you're at A&M what are you?
 you're an Aggie
 ...
 so yeah
 it's like GLBT Aggies
 and like↑
 we could've called it like a queer-straight alliance or something
 but I feel like that's not
 ...
 like↑
 ...
 you need that *Aggie*
 [...]
 you can't fight it
 when the system's that strong. (30 Nov. 2010)

Because the GLBTA is a student organization, Karla sees it as irrevocably tied to the ideology of Texas A&M University itself. As a result, she remained unsure that the organization could divorce itself from the modes of thinking which define the thoughts and actions of so many Texas A&M University students, straight or gay.

In his research, Dilley noted that while “non-heterosexual students involved in non-heterosexual campus organizations found some new friends and relationships, the majority reported having, on the whole, negative experiences with the student organizations” because “gay student groups by themselves, did not mitigate social stigmatization” (202). A similar phenomenon can be identified relating to the GLBTA at Texas A&M. While the GLBTA is able to help many LGBTQ students to make friends they would not have otherwise, or to educate them about the history and politics of the LGBTQ movement, whatever safe space a gay student organization can provide is inherently limited to the space of the meetings themselves. Additionally, the mere fact of having LGBTQ friends or a sense of community does not prevent harassment or bullying

by those who have no desire to be educated into more liberal modes of thinking, and sexual orientation in and of itself does not necessarily provide enough of a unifying factor for those members who are marginalized by other identity categories, like race, in addition to their sexual orientation.

But it is also important to note that while the reach of the GLBTA is inherently limited, that does not mean it is unable to do positive work on the campus of Texas A&M. Tim Miller and David Román note that

...the impulse to seek community comes out of a series of relational and often contradictory tendencies ranging from the desire to be part of a community, however fabricated or temporal that concept of community may be, to the desire to test individual identity in opposition to the very concept of lesbian and gay community itself. (176)

Such tendencies can be noted in the membership of the GLBTA. Even if the GLBTA cannot meet all the needs of all its members, the ability to feel a sense of belonging somewhere on the Texas A&M campus can often be met, if only temporarily. And the sense that the GLBTA was able to provide such a space at all is what keeps many members coming back, keeping the organization strong. Camden noted that he found the GLBTA at a time when he was struggling with his sexuality, and that the community he found there helped him to get the help he needed to recover from his depression. When asked why he stayed in the GLBTA, Camden explained:

I had been
kind of
↑rescued
from the jaws of death
I guess
...
and so
like

I wanted to
 I wanted to be able to help people
 the same way I had been ↑helped. (3 March 2011)

While the resources of the GLBTA are limited for many reasons, and while the organization is poised to best assist only a certain portion of the LGBTQ community at Texas A&M, the GLBTA continues to be a positive force on the A&M campus and a source of hope for many. Muñoz argues that utopia “is all about *desire*, desire for both larger semiabstractions such as a better world or freedom but also, more immediately, better relations within the social” (30 – emphasis mine). Regardless of what the GLBTA may or may not be able to actually accomplish on the Texas A&M University campus, it is the *desires* of its members which have kept it alive for the past quarter-century, and will continue to do so for many years to come. Members of the GLBTA often want more for both the university campus and American culture at large, as well as for the organization itself. But as long as the GLBTA keeps an eye on the future and imagines the possibility a better world for its membership, the organization can continue to adapt and grow, providing a space where LGBTQ students will know they are welcome at Texas A&M, regardless of the dominant campus culture.

The GLBT Aggies on the Public Stage

In the spring of 2011, Texas Rep. Wayne Christian introduced an amendment to the Texas House Budget bill which stated:

An institution of higher education shall use an amount of appropriated funds to support a family and traditional values center for students of the institution that is not less than any amount of appropriated funds used by the institution to support a gender and sexuality center or other center for

students focused on gay, lesbian, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, transsexual, transgender, gender questioning or other gender identity issues. (Dhanani)

The introduction of this amendment coincided with the April 2011 GLBT Health Week programming sponsored by the GLBT Resource Center and the GLBT Aggies at Texas A&M University.⁵ As a result, controversy surrounding Christian's amendment on the Texas A&M University campus, including support for the amendment and the introduction of a Student Senate bill with similar wording by the student organization Texas Aggie Conservatives (TAC), turned into a larger debate about LGBTQ rights and what role the university ought to take in protecting and advocating for its minority student populations.

These events were further complicated by the fact that in March 2011, members of the Texas Aggie Conservatives had come to a GLBT Aggies meeting, video recorded a presentation about safe sex without the knowledge or permission of the membership or those in charge of the presentation, and posted the video online, condemning the presentation as both pornographic and a blatant misuse of university funds (Frillici). As a result, by the time news of Christian's amendment reached Texas A&M, many LGBTQ students were already feeling that whatever safe space they might have been able to claim on the campus had been severely compromised. While some might respond to such feelings of alienation with apathy, many LGBTQ individuals and their allies refused to withdraw from the Aggie experience and the public campus life of Texas A&M. Instead, by appealing to the Aggie ideals of unity and loyalty to tradition, these individuals attempted to make minority voices heard and continue the fight to make

Texas A&M a more diverse and welcoming campus. As a result, during much of April 2011, while waiting for the vote on both Christian's amendment and the subsequent Texas A&M Student Senate bill, several LGBTQ students and their allies submitted opinion articles to *The Battalion*—Texas A&M's daily campus newspaper—and other nearby news sources.

One such article, written by A&M graduate student Armando Rojas, stated:

To be perfectly clear, the authors and Senate do not speak for me. I hope other Aggies agreeTo claim the need for a "traditional values" center, with equal funding as the GLBT center, is an utterly shameful ruse to cover up homophobia under the mantle of preaching equality, as well as the goal of damaging the ability to help GLBT students. Let us be clear: "traditional values" is a dog whistle for conservative, religious, and heterosexual values, and none of these groups face the discrimination and bullying that homosexuals do. Kids have not committed suicide because they were bullied for being heterosexual.... I've whole-heartedly bought into the Aggie ethos, and felt incredibly proud to receive my Aggie ring last week. I've defended the University to those who thought this was a closed-minded, non-inclusive institution; unfortunately, after the passage of this bill, I can no longer do so. (Rojas)

The “Aggie Ethos” to which Armando alludes in this article includes adherence to the Aggie Honor Code and Aggie Core Values.⁶ Texas A&M University has a reputation for conservatism and the value it places on tradition, but here, Armando draws a distinction between Aggie traditions like receiving his Aggie ring and “traditional values,” which he locates in political conservatism and fundamentalist Christianity. According to this perspective, placing a value on history and tradition does not necessarily preclude open-mindedness or the ability to respect *all* individuals—regardless of race/ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs.

In another article published in the *Dallas Voice*, Texas A&M students Tiffany Creecy and Josh Collins provided examples where both black and Muslim students had experienced discrimination on the A&M campus and university officials had spoken out on their behalf – something the administration appeared unwilling to do for the LGBTQ community. They wrote:

It seems that issues of race and religion can more easily elicit a meaningful, public, timely, and calculated response from Texas A&M University officials than issues surrounding sexual identity. Perhaps it is because sexual orientation is not officially a protected class at our public institution of higher learning. Perhaps it is because homophobia still remains strong on this campus and has constructed and sustained fear in the hearts of even our most prominent leaders....A public statement addressing homophobia and heterosexism at Texas A&M must be made before progress can be achieved, before GLBT students can once again feel completely safe and accepted on this campus. (Creecy and Collins)

Here, we can see that the LGBTQ community at Texas A&M, while desiring treatment equal to that of their heterosexual peers, also aligned themselves with other minority groups on the university campus, and demanded that their community receive equal protection by – and support from – university officials and administrators. This is in line with Dilley’s assertion that “gay students viewed themselves as a class of people, and aligned themselves with other minority students and student groups” (166). By demanding the same treatment racial and religious minorities received on the Texas A&M campus, LGBTQ students were able to assert their own marginalized status and argue for protection and affirmation from university officials, lest the administration be forced to admit to supporting homophobia and discrimination.

In addition to these and other newspaper articles, an e-mail to the members of Aggie Allies in April 2011 encouraged all allies to sign a change.org petition created in

opposition to the TAMU Student Senate bill.⁷ Allies were also encouraged to send e-mails to both the Student Body President and campus administration voicing their support for the LGBTQ community at Texas A&M and concern at the university's refusal to make a similar statement. The increased demand for a statement of support from the A&M administration this e-mail in particular illustrates is related to the fact that many Texas A&M administrators are also university alumni. This connection contributed to a fear within the LGBTQ community that not only were administrators pacifying conservative alumni through their lack of a LGBTQ-positive response, but perhaps even implying personal agreement with the viewpoints of TAC members. After repeated requests for a public statement were sent to university administrators and several departments and colleges circulated statements of their own, a meeting was finally scheduled. In mid-May, two administrators in Student Affairs – Lt. General Joseph Weber and Dr. David Parrott – met to discuss the concerns of the LGBTQ community and their allies at Texas A&M and how they might be met by the administration.

Though neither the Texas House budget amendment nor the Texas A&M Student Senate bill ultimately ended up passing, the aftermath of the events of the spring 2011 semester was felt through the summer and fall. Neither Texas more generally nor Texas A&M University specifically are known for being especially LGBTQ-friendly environments. But the actions of the TAC combined with the inaction of the administration left many LGBTQ individuals and their allies feeling that the campus climate, as unsatisfactory as it might have been to begin with, had taken a turn for the

worse. Complicating the issue further, the actions some executive members of the GLBT Aggies took in the wake of these perceived attacks – including sending a representative to Student Senate meetings to argue against the creation of a family and traditional values center – were not well-received by all members of the organization. Some GLBT Aggies members expressed a fear that the political points of view expressed by the most vocal members of the organization would be attributed to all the members of the LGBTQ community at Texas A&M. Michael Warner speaks to this phenomenon in *The Trouble with Normal* when he argues that:

On the one side, the [LGBTQ] movement must appeal to its constituency—people who often have nothing in common other than their search for a sexual world and the shame and stigma that such a search entails....On the other side, that movement attempts to win recognition for these sorry sluts and outcasts, wringing a token of dignity from the very culture that produces and sustains so much shame and stigma in the first place. Drawing the curtain over the sexual culture without which it could not exist, it speaks whatever language of respectability it thinks will translate. (*The Trouble with Normal* 49)

In the spring of 2011, through articles, petitions, and public speeches, those individuals speaking most vocally in support of the LGBTQ community can be seen as speaking just such a “language of respectability” for the queer community at Texas A&M, including arguments which supported LGBTQ inclusion by appealing to the rhetoric of the Aggie ethos itself. But just as the GLBTA has not always been successful at representing the diversity of the community it attempts to serve, the rhetoric employed to defend the LGBTQ community from attacks by politically conservative populations in spring 2011 did not – and could not – represent the diversity of opinions present within the LGBTQ community. As a result, those individuals with no desire to be perceived as “normal” or

accepted as “Aggies” were left feeling unrepresented and marginalized by the LGBTQ peers who were attempting to represent them.

Additionally, when several members of the GLBT Aggies Executive Board used the visibility of their leadership roles within the organization to advocate on behalf of the LGBTQ community more generally, some members reported dissatisfaction with what they perceived to be the GLBTA’s increasingly reactive and defensive stance toward both the TAC and the university itself. The feeling that some opinions and experiences were being marginalized even *within* the GLBTA only increased when those same Executive members encouraged the membership of the GLBT Aggies to not be afraid to be public about their sexuality. It was hoped that through increased visibility the TAC and the administration would be forced to recognize the strength of the LGBTQ community on the Texas A&M campus. Some members, however, expressed a fear that this increased spotlight on the GLBT Aggies had the potential to harm members who were not – and did not want to be – out, especially considering that the TAC used the Freedom of Information Act to pull organizational expense records and had been known to publish student names on their blog in the past. Jude remarked feeling that there were:

many events
 where
 the GLBT community
 was
 shoving its ↑dick down the throat of the rest of the university
 ...
 for↑give
 the
 imagery. (3 Sept. 2011)

The violent and sexual image Jude invokes illustrates the extent to which some members perceived the GLBTA to be reacting insensitively to the events of spring 2011, as well as pointing to a sense that the organization's mission had narrowed so much that its relationship to the university, rather than the needs of its membership, became the major focus.

Here, it becomes important to acknowledge that before the events of spring 2011, the GLBTA's status as a *social* organization according Student Activities had been used as an excuse for why the organization could not take political action against heteronormativity at Texas A&M. In our initial interview, Tia reiterated this sentiment, popular among the Executive Board at the time, noting that:

I feel ↑like
 sometimes
 we↑
 ...
 ...
 I know we can't take a stand
politically
 about things
 because
 we
 ↑are a
 social organization
 and
 that can get us into hot ↑water
 ...
 but I feel like↑
 ...
 ...
 when it comes to our ↑own politics
 as an organization
 ...
 we
 ↑don't

push

...

we are so worried about
whet↑her or not/[offending someone]

yeah

...

it's always our biggest ↑thing

because↑ —

but the thing is↑

we are *always* going to offend someone. (23 Feb. 2011)

Tia's comments point to the fact that, rather than being necessarily in opposition to the more "political" actions of the GLBTA in spring 2011, some members were instead frustrated by what they perceived to be the GLBTA's willingness to hide behind its social status to avoid creating alliances with other student organizations or reaching out more aggressively to minority students on the one hand, followed by the choice to react very aggressively to the actions of the TAC in a way that had the potential to alienate some portion of the organization's current membership, including those who were more closeted. In this way, the tension between the "out" and "closeted" populations of the GLBT Aggies, combined with another pre-existing tension between the organization's "social" versus "political" responsibilities, increased dramatically in spring 2011, threatening to divide the membership of the GLBTA and tear the organization apart.

Conclusions

The events of spring 2011 left many members of LGBTQ community at Texas A&M on unsure footing, wondering if there would be resources to return to in the fall. The increased visibility these events engendered, however, actually generated some positive results, including an increase in membership for the GLBT Aggies, and more

specifically, an influx of allies into the organization. One of my interlocutors, Rachel, mentioned that she didn't join the GLBTA as an undergraduate because:

I felt like I *was* straight
and it was their territory
even if I
almost had the same beliefs↑
if that makes sense↑. (28 April 2011)

When Rachel returned to A&M to get her PhD, however, she identified as pansexual, and that shift was one of the contributing factors which led her to finally join the GLBTA. It could be that other straight allies had initially shared similar feelings to what Rachel expressed, but seeing the LGBTQ community come under fire in such a direct way inspired them to show their support in more tangible ways. The fall of 2011 also saw the formation of two new student organizations related to issues of sexual orientation. Shades of Color is devoted to an exploration of the intersection between race/ethnicity and sexuality, with a focus on “discourse not discrimination” (*Shades of Color*). Rainbow Initiative is an organization which hopes to “serve as a meeting place for diverse and potentially controversial opinions” and “seeks to create an environment where all persons regardless of age, race, sex, color, religion, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, and disability should be treated equally” (“Rainbow Initiative”).

The emergence of these new student organizations has been viewed by some as a splintering of the LGBTQ community at Texas A&M, and by others as a natural progression and response to the dramatic growth of the GLBTA's membership over the past five years or so. While an organization like Cepheid Variable has been able to deal

with a membership of almost one hundred students through the formation of subcommittees, an attempt to develop small groups based on identity categories in the GLBTA in spring 2011 was met with disapproval by many members and never reached maturation. As the only LGBTQ organization at Texas A&M, the GLBTA was necessarily limited in its reach, in part because its focus had to remain so broad. The development of an organization like Shades of Color which can define its mission statement more narrowly, however, provides a space where LGBTQ individuals who also belong to ethnic minorities can unite based on the intersectionality of their multiple marginalized identities and connect on a scale which wasn't achieved successfully in the existing configuration of the GLBTA. It is also important to note, as Tia did in our interview, that:

GLBT equ↑ality
 ...
 needs to come
 hand-in-hand
 to me personally
 with *other* forms of equality
 uh
 because↑
 once you↑
 ...
 ↑finish the battle
 and ↑win those rights↑
 what are you left with?
 ...
 like↑
 ...
 not everyone is ↑equal
 you give↑ me that *one* right as
 someone who's
 ...
 you ↑know

↑part of that group
 ...
 but ↑I *still* suffer in other ways↑
 and there are
 various people
 after that
 who will suffer in-in
 ↑ways like that. (29 Aug. 2011)

For individuals like Tia who experience life at an intersection of marginalities, LGBTQ equality in and of itself is not enough. With the increased political bent the GLBTA began to take in spring 2011, those individuals already feeling marginalized within the GLBTA itself began to feel even more so. The focus the rhetoric of Shades of Color and Rainbow Initiative shows toward discourse, diversity, and inclusivity is no mistake—it seems these organizations have taken it upon themselves to fill in the gaps a GLBTA consumed with political battles on the Texas A&M campus would not be able to meet. In this sense, these new LGBTQ organizations might point to a different kind of utopia than the GLBTA originally imagined or promised its membership. For while Dolan extols the theatre as “a place to rehearse our potentially full and effective participation in a more radical, participatory, representative democracy,” the formation of organizations like Shades of Color and Rainbow Initiative might point toward a space outside the theatre where that kind of utopian vision is also desired and can be attempted (91).

The formation of Shades of Color and Rainbow Initiative in the fall of 2011 also clarified a potential dilemma which at least some portion of the GLBTA’s membership face. In our interview, Dre noted that:

GLBT has very much been for me
 ...
 you know

a few *select* friends↑
 I've ↑*never* really felt
that connected to
 ...
everyone
 in GLBT
 as a *whole*. (22 Sept. 2011)

When many of the individuals I had formed close relationships with in the 2010-2011 school year chose to attend Shades of Color and Rainbow Initiative in lieu of the GLBTA in fall 2011, I found that Dre's observation rang true for me as well. Attending GLBTA meetings without my own group of "a few select friends," I found the organization much less welcoming, and began to wonder how many other members found satisfaction through a few close friendships, rather than the organization as a whole. While I ultimately got from the GLBTA what I wanted – friendship and support – I left both my participant-observation and the organization itself with a feeling of ambivalence, and a wish that the organization could do *more* or *better* for the LGBTQ community at Texas A&M, as Tia had previously expressed. I argue that the utopia the GLBTA promises remains unfulfilled for many members because the marginalization of the LGBTQ community at large on the A&M campus leads to much of the diversity *within* that community remaining unaddressed, as the organization attempts to project a united front against attack. At the end of *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz invites his readers to consider the utopian vision of the book as "an insistence on something else, something better, something dawning" (189). I cannot help but encourage the LGBTQ community of Texas A&M to look at the events of spring 2011 in a similar light. It is my hope that something better does come for the LGBTQ community at Texas A&M, whatever that

might mean, and that its queer students continue to hope, to look toward the horizon, and to work to bring whatever kind of better world they imagine into being.

Notes

¹ The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Aggies is alternately referred to by its membership as “the GLBTA” and the “GLBT Aggies.” I will mirror this usage in my analysis, keeping in mind what I believe to be its intent—the ability to strategically highlight or underplay the centrality of the Aggie identity to the organization’s mission and activities on the Texas A&M University campus. The GLBTA was the *only* organization to address sexual orientation issues at Texas A&M for the first year of my participant-observation, and will receive the bulk of my analysis as a result. I will return to the formation of Shades of Color and Rainbow Initiative later, as the events of spring and summer 2011 highlight much about the circulation of discourse about sexuality at A&M.

² The interview transcription key can be located in the nomenclature section.

³ The Aggie Honor Code is that “An Aggie does not lie, cheat, or steal, or tolerate those who do” (<http://student-rules.tamu.edu/aggiecode>). The GLBTA has a list of Safe Zone Agreements which are read at the beginning of every meeting and help to ensure that the meeting space is respectful and that the personal information revealed in a meeting is not spoken of elsewhere without permission. As a part of these Agreements, the GLBTA modified the Aggie Honor Code to read: “An Aggie does not force someone to lie about who they are, cheat someone out of a positive experience, or steal their dignity.”

⁴ Texas A&M University’s purpose statement is “To develop leaders of character dedicated to serving the greater good.” (<http://www.tamu.edu/about/coreValues.html>) The University proposes to achieve that goal by its students, faculty, and staff adhering to six Aggie Core Values: Excellence, Integrity, Leadership, Loyalty, Respect, and Selfless Service.

⁵ The GLBT Resource Center at Texas A&M University was created in 2007 “is a resource and referral center for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Aggies and their straight supporters. The Center educates all campus and community constituencies on GLBT issues....[and] collaborates with student organizations, campus departments, and local community organizations to provide students with access to resources, activities, and support services.” (<http://studentlife.tamu.edu/glbtl/>) The GLBT Resource Center often co-programs with the GLBT Aggies, but due to the constraints of this project, a deeper analysis of that relationship is beyond my scope.

⁶ The Aggie Honor Code states: “An Aggie does not lie, cheat, or steal, or tolerate those who do” (<http://compliance.tamu.edu/CodeConduct.aspx>). Texas A&M University’s Aggie Core Values are Excellence, Integrity, Leadership, Loyalty, Respect, and Selfless Service (<http://www.tamu.edu/about/coreValues.html>).

⁷ Aggie Allies is an independent campus Committee started in the summer of 1993 and currently hosted by the Department of Student Life. According to their website, (<http://allies.tamu.edu/allyInfo>) an ally is defined as: “staff, faculty, and students at Texas A&M University who...are willing to provide a safe haven, a listening ear, and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people or anyone dealing with sexual orientation issues... [and] have attended a training workshop...to learn about the benefits and responsibilities of being an Ally.” More information on the petition can be found at: <http://www.change.org/petitions/protect-glbtl-resources-dont-defund-glbtl-centers-for-traditional-and-family-values-center>

CONCLUSIONS

I draw several conclusions about queerness, utopia, and performance from this project. Some are more straightforward than others, like the fact that smaller utopias seem to survive better intact, as evidenced both by the split in the GLBT Aggies, which can be attributed in part to the growth of their membership, and the fact that the Tim Miller workshop created the least internally contested utopia found in my field sites. The Tim Miller workshop also points to the possibility that theatrical performances are able to create the strongest sense of utopian community, even if it is also ultimately the most ephemeral. Yet, the queer utopias created within Cepheid Variable and the GLBT Aggies suggest that performance practices and rituals outside the theatre, like storytelling, are able to produce a sense of community which can be at least partially sustained and perpetuated through time. The centrality of some form of performance practice in each of the utopian communities considered here points to the possibility that even when highly aestheticized performance events are not a part of the construction of utopian communities, successful utopias still use performance to create and perpetuate themselves – a finding which validates the expansion of Performance Studies to look at cultural performances and the performance of identity in addition to theatre, music, and dance.

This is significant because while Dolan recognizes that storytelling in particular “works structurally to draw the audience closer and to offer them models for agency, for transformation and change,” she also argues ultimately that “what distinguishes theater

from other social activity is the intense listening it requires people to do together,” arguing that the utopian performative is at its most powerful inside the theatrical frame (60; 79). Based on my observations with Cepheid Variable and the GLBTA, however, I argue that the intensity of listening and being in the moment which can – and does – happen in the theatre also happens outside it, as evidenced in Cepheid especially through storytelling and the listening required to perpetuate Cepheid joke culture. I would also argue that the transformative potential of *queer* storytelling in particular, noted by Miller and Román, necessitates observation of the construction of utopia through cultural performances and folkloric practices as well as whatever performances might take place on the theatrical stage. In light of my observations, I would challenge both Dolan and Muñoz to consider the role of affect and aesthetics in the quotidian and how everyday experience – not just “art” and “performance” writ large – might contribute to the construction of utopia. For while Muñoz gestures toward the value of the quotidian in *Cruising Utopia*, he still ultimately analyzes poems and song lyrics about the everyday in lieu of actual lived experiences.

In addition to these conclusions, Shades of Color and Rainbow Initiative point to the possibility for utopias to be stacked, leading to the desire to form a utopia within a utopia within a utopia when the original utopian desires of some individuals are still not being met by the initial community. The formation of these organizations also suggests that the more strongly utopias can address diversity, including the intersectionality of identities present among their membership, the more likely they are to be able to survive intact. The comparison of these organizations with the Tim Miller workshop additionally

points to the possibility that the individuals who look for, or recognize, utopia most urgently are often the ones most likely to seek it out or create it out of the means and opportunities available to them. Such a comparison further suggests that queer utopian performance in particular asserts itself most strongly in times of upheaval and distress, whether on an individual or community level.

The strength of the community found in Cepheid Variable additionally suggests that non-LGBTQ individuals can sometimes gain stronger benefits from queer intimacy-building practices than their LGBTQ counterparts because they do not have to deal with the same level of marginalization and discrimination from society at large. Cepheid's reclamation of the nerd/geek identity also shows that some marginalized identities are easier to reclaim than others, and that sustaining a strongly counterpublic identity is easiest when the social stigma attached to a certain group has been most strongly reclaimed. The success of Cepheid also suggests that utopias built around shared interests have the potential to be stronger than those built around shared identity categories alone. Based on my work with Cepheid in particular, I challenge Muñoz's assertion that "if queerness is to have any value whatsoever, it must be viewed as being visible *only* in the horizon" (11 – emphasis mine). I argue that some level or form of queerness has to be accessible in the present and not only the future – how else could a counterpublic utopia understand itself as such? The construction of a queer nerd identity within Cepheid Variable suggests that looking outside the LGBTQ community could provide a place to locate queerness in the present without the normalizing pull of some LGBTQ rhetoric, like that surrounding gay marriage and adoption, which Muñoz finds

especially stultifying to the formation of a present queerness. While it is important to ensure that queerness as a concept is not overtaken or usurped by straight culture, the joy so many Cepheids experience within their organization is a challenge to consider what pleasures could be found in queerness in the here and now, as well as on the horizon.

Additionally, the formation of a Cepheid “family,” coupled with the willingness for GLBTA members to continue participation because of a few close friendships, points to the possibility that it is the strength of the *intimacy* built into queer utopias which sustains them, even when they might not be able to meet the needs of everyone involved. The differences between Cepheid Variable and the GLBTA also point to the possibility that utopian communities can fall victim to a sort of self-fulfilling prophesy. Has Cepheid been able to survive because they tell stories about how Cepheid survives, while the GLBTA rhetoric highlighting LGBTQ marginalization blinded the organization to instances of internal marginalization? Certainly, it is important to not obscure the homophobia present at Texas A&M and to consider the hegemonic power structures of the university, but I think it is also important to consider what Cepheid’s focus on hope and resiliency might have to teach us about the formation of sustainable utopian communities.

Whatever other conclusions can be drawn from this project, ultimately, each of these three field sites illuminate the fact that utopia persists more strongly than it has been previously given credit for. This persistence can be hard to locate, however, because the utopias which *do* persist are changing and evolving over time. If the GLBTA in particular can teach us anything, it is that the members of a utopian community have

to be willing to embrace the change necessary to sustain utopia, as well as embracing the potential failure that change represents. Otherwise, members of any utopia face the very real possibility that their community will fracture or disintegrate altogether. It is possible that the structure of student organizations in particular allows for the formation of utopian communities which are both temporary (in the sense that each individual member graduates and leaves) and sustainable over time (despite changes in membership, the organization itself persists). The sustained temporality Cepheid Variable and the GLBTA exhibit reaffirms the construction of utopia as a process rather than a result, and points to the value of the repetition present in performance practice.

Speaking of process, Dolan stresses the importance of the sense of democratic citizenship utopia can fuel, arguing that the affective power of the utopian performative is its ability to remind us that “a better world doesn’t have to be an out-of-reach ideal, but a process of civic engagement that brings it incrementally closer” (21). The queer intimacy-building practices present in my field sites show that people pay attention to each other and what they feel even outside of theatrical performance spaces, and suggest that the love sustaining queer intimacy might be able to “bend life to imitate theatre,” or serve as a means for affect to translate outside the theatrical performance space (Dolan 90). Dolan herself suggests that performance can be a rehearsal of identity, and the focus on discourse present in an organization like Shades of Color in particular might provide another vehicle for individuals to “rehearse speaking to and with each other” in a way that might inspire individuals “to *do* something to make the world better,” leading to incremental social changes on the ground (103; 111 – emphasis original). The

understanding of identity as performance which queer individuals in particular often gain also opens up a space for queer utopias in particular to be effective at creating the kind of democratic citizenship Dolan imagines, both inside and outside the theatre.

As of February 2012, the “Broken is Better: 23 Aggies Can’t Be Wrong” Facebook group is still operational, but has seen no activity since August 2011, suggesting that the workshop participants have long since given up the possibility of actually ever getting back together in person. Several participants in the Tim Miller workshop, myself included, participated in another devised theatre workshop and performance hosted by Alvaro and Michelle Rios in fall 2011, but that workshop did not engender the same sense of community or afterlife Miller’s did. The members of Cepheid Variable are gearing up for AggieCon 43 and have temporarily moved D-raid to a local Fudruckers due to complaints by some Double Daves staff about the supposed unpredictability of the influx of business Cepheid brought every Tuesday around 9:05pm. Whether or not Cepheid decides to return to Double Daves, I am sure this hiatus will make a good story someday, and like the dead cat story, will reaffirm Cepheid’s ability to persist in the face of adversity. The GLBT Aggies are likewise continuing as usual, and the TAC seems currently content to direct its focus elsewhere. Both Shades of Color and Rainbow Initiative are gaining membership and interest, though it is still too early to tell how long either organization might last, or what will happen to them after the last of the founding members graduate. I hope they succeed.

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VITA

Dana Nicole Sayre

Address

Department of Performance Studies
 College of Liberal Arts
 MS 4240 TAMU
 College Station, TX 77843-4240

Email Address

dana.sayre@gmail.com

Education

B.A., Theatre, Fairmont State University, 2009
 B.A., English, Fairmont State University, 2010
 M.A., Performance Studies, Texas A&M University, 2012

Research Interests

Feminist/Queer Performance Theory and Practice, Participatory Fan Culture,
 Autobiographical Performance, Utopia

Publications

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Book Reviews

Shepard, Benjamin. “Queer Political Performance and Protest: Play, Pleasure and Social
 Movement.” *Liminalities* 7.1 (2011).

Membership in Professional Organizations

Alpha Psi Omega Honor Fraternity
 Sigma Tau Delta Honor Fraternity
 American Culture Association