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Isom Fellowship Proposal: Queer Life Histories in Mississippi

Amy McDowell and Jessie Wilkerson

To date, there has been no sustained effort to document and preserve LGBTQ history in Mississippi. Although important, the only monograph on queer history in Mississippi, written twenty years ago, focuses almost exclusively on the history of gay white men (John Howard, *Men Like That*, 1999). Our project intends to fill this research gap. It takes a two-pronged approach to the study of diverse queer individuals and networks in the Northeastern part of the state. First, we aim to collect and preserve life history interviews with LGBTQ persons living in Mississippi in the post gay-liberation era (namely individuals who grew up during and after the 1970s). Once collected and transcribed, we will donate these oral history interviews to the Invisible Histories archive. Second, we aim to produce scholarly publications that investigate how queer *social scenes* are created and defended in the state, how individuals discover and participate in these scenes, and how these scenes are sustained and change over time. We define *social scenes* as social networks, rituals, and collective identities that take shape around particular activities such as music and literature and settings such as bars and bookstores. We aim to center transgender, gender nonconforming, lesbian women, and queer people of color in our study. By focusing on these more marginalized social actors, we will problematize a monolithic understanding of “queer scenes” or “queer space,” exploring if and how queer social scenes differ across social groups. We will also historicize these social scenes, considering how they relate to and have been shaped by policies, the economy, and transformations in culture and society.

To get this project started, we will recruit interviewees who were affiliated with Rumors nightclub, a bar in Tupelo, Mississippi. The Rumors bar was featured in the award winning documentary film *Small Town Gay Bar* (Ingram 2006). One member of this research team

acquired the LP collection that once belonged to Charles Smith, a DJ at Rumors, and she plans to donate these LPs to the Invisible Histories satellite repository at the University of Mississippi. We propose that this collection can be used to make contacts with interviewees living in Lee County, where the Rumors bar once stood. With that said, this is not a study of gay bars per se. Rumors (and the collection of Charles Smith) is the starting point that will lead us to other queer networks in rural parts of Northeast Mississippi. Once we make these initial contacts, we will begin recruiting interviewees using the snowball sampling technique, meaning we will ask our first interviewees to recruit other participants for the study. This snowball technique enables us to track social networks – or social scenes – through this sampling method. If we find that this social network is raced and sexualized in a particular way (i.e., all interviewees refer white gay men or white lesbian women for the study), we will purposively sample from another social scene that we learn about as we move forward with this project.

We have ambitious and important research goals: we plan to complete 40-50 oral history interviews by the end of fall 2020. Over the two years we will complete the following: contact and recruit interviewees; complete preparatory research on the individuals we interview; travel to research sites in Northeast Mississippi; perform interviews; write grants for additional funding sources; and prepare scholarly publications for peer review. Also, if granted this Isom fellowship, we will petition for funding from our respective departments (History and Sociology/Anthropology) and use those extra funds to organize and host a symposium on Queer Life in the South during the 2020-2021 academic year at the University of Mississippi. We are aware of scholars at both the Mississippi University for Women and Mississippi State University who are conducting research on queer life in the South and we are excited about the opportunity of hosting these scholars for a symposium here at the University of Mississippi.

Budget for Queer Life Histories Project

To reach our goals, we are requesting funding for interview transcription as well as compensation for travel to perform interviews, along with meals while we're on the road or meeting with interviewees. Each life history interview typically lasts approximately 2 hours each and costs around \$180.00 each to transcribe. If we conduct 40 interviews, we will spend approximately \$3600 per year on transcription, and if we secure more funding we will up the interviews to fifty. The remaining funds (approximately \$900 without other funding) will help us cover the costs of travel and meals when we're conducting fieldwork. We will be applying for \$600 from the History Department's Dalrymple library fund annually in order to help cover the cost of transcription; we also hope that the Mellon grant might help cover some of these costs. If we secure additional funding, we will also consider hiring a graduate research assistant who could assist with interviews.

Transcription for Life History Interviews: 40-50 interviews total = \$7200 to \$9,000.00

- The median rate for interview transcription is \$1.50 per minute of audio file.
- A 2 hour-long interview will cost \$180.00 to transcribe: 120 minutes x \$1.50 = \$180.00.
- We will perform 40-50 interviews: 40 to 50 x \$180.00 = \$7,200 to \$9,000.00
- We will offset the costs by requesting Dalrymple funds among others.

Fieldwork—funding for travel and meals = \$3000, or \$1500 per summer

Total budget for 2019 and 2020 fellowship for both McDowell and Wilkerson: \$9,000.00*

Course for Gender Studies

We are also enthusiastic about developing a cross-listed course for Gender Studies titled, "Queer Life in the South." This team-taught course could be an undergraduate or graduate seminar—depending on the needs of the gender studies program—that introduces students to both a historical and sociological approach to LGBTQ life in the rural south. The course will utilize sources generated from this project to illustrate how historians and sociologists interpret and conceptualize interviews in different and similar ways.