2012

Place, Race, and Religion in the Local Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Movement of Memphis, Tennessee

Amy Catherine Ulmer

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd

Part of the American Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.
PLACE, RACE, AND RELIGION IN THE LOCAL LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY AND MOVEMENT IN MEMPHIS

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Southern Studies The University of Mississippi

By

AMY C. ULMER

May 2012
ABSTRACT

This study observes the role of place in the local LGBT community and movement of Memphis, Tennessee. I gathered information from fifteen interviews, including LGBT Memphians, activists, preachers, and public figures to show what aspects of place have been the most significant in shaping the nature of the local movement, which has been growing since the early 2000s. I suggest that the conservatism, race, and religiosity of Memphis have played the most significant role. The first chapter demonstrates how LGBTs operate within a city that maintains pockets of openness, but remains largely LGBT-unfriendly according to interviewees. The second chapter observes the role of race and Memphis’ history of racial division and how those factors influence the African American LGBT community and LGBT community as a whole. The final chapter demonstrates the intersections of activism and conservatism with regard to church involvement in the local movement. I show that place shapes the identity negotiations LGBT Memphians make in their daily lives, their political interests, and the movement’s goals and strategies. I also demonstrate that racial division continues to plague Memphis and also divides the LGBT community, as LGBT issues live differently in black and white communities. Finally, I show how LGBT friendly churches in Memphis have functioned as a force of social change within the local movement, alleviating racial division, supporting the LGBT community, and helping to spread a Christian message of equality.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MGLCC</td>
<td>Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEP</td>
<td>Tennessee Equality Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT</td>
<td>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONA</td>
<td>Open And Affirming</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Will Batts and the Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center for providing the opportunity and space to conduct interviews.

In addition, I express my full appreciation for all who participated in my research. Their contributions are invaluable, and my thesis could not have been accomplished without them.

Finally, I want to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Jaime Harker, Dr. Katie McKee, and Dr. Zandria Robinson for their help and guidance, as well as my fellow Southern Studies graduates who remained supportive throughout the semester.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... ii

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS............................................................................................... iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS........................................................................................................ iv

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

II. “A LOT OF LITTLE ISLANDS”: MEMPHIS LGBT LIFE, ACTIVISM, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE .................................................................................................................. 16

III. BLACK AND GAY: RACE AND THE MEMPHIS LGBT COMMUNITY ................... 42

IV. THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL CHANGE: CHURCH INVOLVEMENT IN THE MEMPHIS LGBT MOVEMENT .................................................................................................................. 63

V. CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................. 82

LIST OF REFERENCES ........................................................................................................ 88

LIST OF APPENDICES ........................................................................................................ 95

VITA ....................................................................................................................................... 220
I. INTRODUCTION

When I began this project, typical responses I received after sharing my research topic include, “Is there much of a gay scene in Memphis?,” “the Memphis LGBT movement? Is there one?,” and even, “That must be depressing.” These comments reflect common notions of LGBT life in the South as oppressive, dull, or non-existent. While many disadvantages come with the South’s lack of legal protections that LGBTs might enjoy elsewhere, I hope to challenge the worn-out stereotype of the South as backward by introducing new ways of observing and discussing the operation of region within the southern LGBT community and movement. Using Memphis as a case study, I highlight some of the paradoxes and contradictions of queer southern life, complicating common understandings of the South as a repressive space for LGBT individuals along with the intertwined nature of politics, race, and religion in the city. I also observe intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and region in southern queer identity and the political implications of the multiple ways LGBTs structure their identities. In doing so, I hope to show the diversity in LGBT experience, the range of political issues considered important to LGBT Memphians, and what that means for the local movement. Observing challenges specific to the Memphis LGBT movement, I note the ways conservatism and activism have intersected, specifically through coalition building between secular LGBT organizations and progressive churches that combat conservative religious opposition in Memphis. Though I have separated place, race, and religion for analytical purposes, they are all recurring themes throughout the work, reflecting their interconnected nature in Memphis.
1. Why Memphis?

In *Memphis and the Paradox of Place*, Wanda Rushing brings to light the city’s paradoxical role as distinctly southern and local, yet connected to the world through commerce and communication. According to Rushing, “Memphis is a place of innovation and tradition, poverty and power, as well as continuity and disruption” (7). Though attitudes in the city have not changed much, according to Rushing, Memphis has “proved that it can learn from its mistakes,” being the place where Martin Luther King Jr. was refused proper respects at his funera, and which now houses the National Civil Rights Museum. This, Rushing argues, serves as “a link between Memphis and the struggle for human rights around the world” (3). Memphis has been described as “an inland river city where cultures, rich and poor, black and white, urban and rural, Northern and Southern…collide” (6). Rushing shows that Memphis is neither old nor new South, neither rural nor urban exclusively, global or local exclusively, but a hybrid that makes Memphis a unique place for my study.

Memphis is an urban place in the heart of the Bible Belt, in close proximity to the conservative states of Mississippi and Arkansas, and surrounded by rural areas within Shelby County. Though Memphis is a metropolitan area and global distribution center, in many ways, it is also a “sleepy southern town” (Brown). Memphis is not as progressive as other cities, as one of the few of its size without a city ordinance that protects LGBTs from discrimination in employment, while southern cities such as Atlanta, New Orleans, Raleigh and Dallas have had such city ordinances since the late 1980s and early 1990s (Fleischmann and Hardman 410). Other paradoxical aspects of Memphis include the city’s sixty-five percent black population within a state that is seventy-eight percent white, which makes race an especially potent factor within the city’s LGBT community (U.S. Census 2010). Despite its lack of legal protections for
LGBTs, Memphis is also one of the only cities in the Mid-South with a gay and lesbian community center, one that is incredibly active, attracting LGBTs not only from Memphis proper, but from surrounding small towns and communities as well. Collectively, these factors make Memphis an interesting space and place for studying the local LGBT community and movement for LGBT rights.

Focusing only on the progress of major cities of the West Coast and New England where LGBT rights have been advanced the furthest often obscures the diversity of the LGBT movement, the progression of which takes different shapes in different regions. Indeed, according to Arnold Fleischmann and Jason Hardman who study Atlanta’s LGBT movement, “gay politics involves both a ‘deep agenda’ that is the same everywhere and local agendas that differ”(409). Though Memphis and the national movement for LGBT rights share similar goals and strategies, there are also aspects of the local movement specific to place. Activism in Memphis does not quite resemble traditional approaches emanating out of national LGBT rights organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), nor does it mirror queer activism that might come from San Francisco or New York. Instead, Memphis lies somewhere in the middle, incorporating different strategies in response to conservatism. This study will contribute to other studies that help gauge the overall impact of the LGBT movement and the course it has taken regionally.

1. Previous Research

My research draws from several queer academic works that influence my approach and help structure this paper. Mary L. Gray’s Out in the Country: Youth Media and Queer Visibility in Rural America observes how a rural politics of identity functions in small towns and
communities. Working to debunk the idea that rural areas serve as “gay America’s closet” in contrast to the supposed freedom of expression that urban areas allow, Gray examines the differing strategies that rural queer youth use to create belonging and visibility with the limited resources available to them. Arguing against the binary of urban oases/rural closets, Gray critiques the privileging of some queer identities over others (4). Though Memphis is considered an urban place, I show that the city has many small town qualities that complicate the rural/urban divide and call for different strategies of visibility and activism. Out in the Country highlights the role of identity negotiating among queer rural youth, which I show functions as an important tool in the lives of “out” LGBT Memphians who must find or create their own queer spaces within a larger actual or perceived unwelcoming context (11). Like Gray, I demonstrate the importance of place and space in shaping LGBT visibility.

John Howard’s Men Like That: A Southern Queer History reveals the importance of home, school, and church, as sexually expressive spaces in the lives of queer male rural Mississippians (xi-xiii). Calling for the recognition of the variety of ways rural (homo)sexuality plays out differently than in urban settings, Howard complicates common understandings of the South as a repressive location for queer individuals by incorporating different modes of analysis, utilizing broader definitions and understandings of the function of region in queer life. Both Gray and Howard call into question “presumptions of queerness’ proper place,” which lies in no single racial or ethnic community, political party, church denomination, rural or urban location, or region (Gray 9). Likewise, I reveal the diversity of LGBT experience while demonstrating the operation of region in the lives of LGBT Memphians.

Other queer academic sources include two works by E. Patrick Johnson, Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South, and “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer
Studies I learned from My Grandmother.” Through oral history, Sweat Tea exposes the realities of black gay men as racial and sexual minorities living in the South. Both Sweat Tea and “Quare Studies” are used to highlight intersections of race, sexuality, gender, class, and region, and complicate LGBT issues in the African American community by showing the various ways sexuality might play out differently within black and white communities (Johnson, Sweat Tea, “Quare Studies” 124-157). This is especially important in analyzing Memphis, where a majority black population and history of racial struggle influences the discourse surrounding civil rights and LGBT rights in Memphis, activists’ strategies, and the overall shape the local movement has taken. I argue that “quare” depicts the type of activism happening in Memphis where “queer” and “LGBT” fail to do so.

Scott Herring in Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism argues that queer studies must get beyond the idea of the metropolis as the essential element of queer culture. Herring develops an anti-urban theory that goes against notions of the rural as lacking, showing how queer artists have used rural stylistics to critique urban LGBT norms (6). Rejecting the “flight to the city” narrative that “continues to provide many metronormative U.S. queer men with a sense of collective identity,” Herring shows how queer rural dwellers disavow such urbanized ideals (113). Incorporating Herring’s argument, I also call for a look beyond areas considered conducive to a thriving LGBT community, demonstrating how queer identity functions differently in Memphis, a southern city where both rural and urban sensibilities intersect. Focusing only on urban queer life in LGBT friendly cities obscures the operation of region and the differing modes by which southern or small town LGBTs operate within spaces of limited resources as well as perceived or actually more hostile environments. I demonstrate that
the narrow view of southern LGBT life as culturally deprived or oppressed is an inaccurate assessment of what is happening in the South, showing the variety of reasons LGBTs choose to stay in Memphis.

2. A Note about Language

When I mention “politics” and the “political” I am incorporating a much broader definition than often allowed. Politics in this sense might encompass culture, religion, race, region, and daily life. This definition is required to speak of Memphis and Tennessee politics, which is so intertwined with race and religion that it is nearly impossible to speak of one without also discussing the other. Moreover, we are all political actors in our daily lives. I consider such actions as participating in Pride, attending an Open and Affirming church service, or going to a gay bar political statements, which, in the South, take on significantly different meanings. For example, when I asked Memphis LGBT historian Vincent Astor if he considered the activities listed above, or even simply being “out” forms of activism, he replied, “Yes. Definitely. Because you’re in your own little safe space, but there are many other places that are not so safe. I haven’t been to the St. Patrick’s Day parade with the gay contingent yet…it just blows my mind that they’re in a St. Patrick’s day parade where gays are banned in other cities in the country, and on Beale Street, which is redneck tourist heaven” (Appendix C). Participating in these activities in New York would not make the same statement as they might in Memphis, where there are fewer “safe places” for openly LGBT individuals as Astor posits. Therefore, the term “activism” also takes on a broader definition in this context, encompassing seemingly commonplace, non-controversial activities. Activism might also describe traditional forms that organizations such as the Tennessee Equality Project (TEP) incorporate along the lines of awareness, outreach,
education, and lobbying, or it may refer to symbolic forms of activism that welcoming churches in Memphis utilize by providing space and gay-straight constituency. LGBT politics and activism may be included with much broader social issues of peace, justice, and equality, involving anti-war, women’s rights, civil rights, and environmental concerns. Because Memphis’ LGBT community, politics, and activism do not fit a specific mold, broad definitions and different modes of analysis are needed to account for region.

Like Gray in *Out in the Country*, I use the term “community” as more of an aspiration or ideal than a reality, while simultaneously acknowledging its importance as an organizing principle (Gray 27). I also want to clarify my use of the terms “closeted” and “out.” As E. Patrick Johnson notes in *Black Gay Men of the South*, “coming out” is a contested phrase. Being “in the closet” suggests that one is either in or out with little variability. Noting the impact of region and coming out, Johnson shows that some LGBT southerners never officially “come out,” but their friends and family “just know” (109). Even when family members welcome and accommodate their loved one’s partners publicly, the fact that the couple is queer might remain private, yet an open secret. LGBT southerners may simply choose not to announce their sexuality in a public way (109). With that said, I use the terms “closeted”/“out” not as a strict binary, but recognizing the terms’ often complicated nature. Finally, I sometimes use “queer,” recognizing that individual sexual identities and behavior might not consistently fit one category or the other and pointing to the fluidity and variability of gender and sexuality. However, I also acknowledge that many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people do not use “queer,” a word fraught with ambiguity that does not hold the same meaning for people across racial, ethnic, class and regional lines, as I demonstrate. Therefore, I use “LGBT” to encompass self-identified gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgenders, incorporating a politics of identity throughout this work.
“LGBT” is often considered a passé term, one that has been replaced by “queer,” which supposedly transcends the need for identity categories. While queer theorists have transformed the way we theorize gender and sexuality by deconstructing binaries such as heterosexual/homosexual, gay/lesbian, masculine/feminine, and identity categories, “queer” can gloss over important issues (Johnson and Henderson 5). Acknowledging the limitations of sexual identity categories, I also note their historical significance in giving voice to those who previously had none, as critics of identity politics seem to ignore the ways that traditional social identities and communal ties can be important to one’s survival (Halberstam 20, Johnson, “Quare Studies” 130). Furthermore, white queer theorists have at times failed to consider the impact of intersections of queer sexualities with other minority categories. As E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson of Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology and other queer theorists note, “the deconstruction of binaries and the explicit ‘unmarking’ of difference (e.g., gender, race, class, region, able-bodiedness, etc.) have serious implications for those for whom these other differences ‘matter’” (5). Indeed, queer theorizing can de-emphasize the impact of class and racial privilege, which I attempt to account for by addressing the intersectionality of sexuality with other minority categories.

The work of Kimberlé Crenshaw among others has been especially important in influencing the concept of intersectionality. Crenshaw posits that traditional discourses on racism and sexism conflate or ignore intragroup differences. The structuring of minority identities as either/or (i.e. black or gay, female or black, etc.) relegates those with multiple minority identities, such as black women, the focus of Crenshaw’s studies, to a “location that resists telling” (1242). Demonstrating that black women have been marginalized within both discourses on racism and sexism, Crenshaw posits that aspects of class, race, and gender cannot be analyzed separately.
Instead, she shows that the intersections of multiple grounds of identity must be accounted for when considering how the social world is constructed (1245). I hope to demonstrate that LGBT experiences are not the same over the “L,” “G,” “B,” or “T,” nor across lines of gender, class, race, and region, and account for interactions of minority identities and how they shape the ways Memphis LGBTs experience the world.

3. Methods

The interviews served as the most substantial source of information during my research, forming the basis of this work. I conducted fifteen interviews from June 2011 to January 2012, acquiring participants by seeking volunteers through the MGLCC’s weekly newsletter. I ran two advertisements in the newsletter, one for LGBTs in general and one to gain more transgender participants. I also asked an active volunteer of the MGLCC, Martavius Hampton, to help gain more African American participants. The interviews, which were taped and transcribed and are included in the Appendices, were generally forty-five minutes to an hour long and conducted at the MGLCC, coffee shops, or individual’s offices of employment, while a few follow-ups were held over the phone and via email. The turnout of general community members includes three male to female white transgenders, three black gay men, one black lesbian, one white lesbian, and one white gay man. Public figures of the queer community include LGBT historian of Memphis Vincent Astor; attorney at law Susan McKenzie; pastor of Holy Trinity Community church, Rev. Paul Ecknes-Tucker; and vice chair of the Shelby County Tennessee Equality Project (TEP), Michelle Bliss. Additional interviews include Cheryl Cornish, former preacher of First Congregational United Church of Christ and Andy Andrews, pastor of St. Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral, both straight allies of the Memphis LGBT community. The interviewees range in age
from twenty-two to sixty. Interviews also range in religious denomination affiliation and education levels, however, because of the small sample, most are middle class and black or white. Because I relied on volunteers from the MGLCC, nearly all but one participant identified openly, which neglects a population that may not identify as LGBT, as well as those who might not be “out” in their communities. Because no bisexuals volunteered to be interviewed, they are also not represented. This could be due to the ability of bisexuals to blend socially within heterosexual circles, with less of a need for the center, though that may not always be the case. Despite the lack of bisexuals, I use “LGBT” as descriptive of the type of identity politics and activism discussed. For the purposes of this paper, interviews were limited to LGBTs associated with the MGLCC. Although I do not have a fully representative sample, I have captured the movement elite, which includes both people on the ground and public figures, and is valuable for understanding intersections of the personal and political in the local movement.

4. The Context of the Memphis LGBT Movement

It is important to describe the political atmosphere of Tennessee in order to contextualize issues shaping LGBT daily life and the local movement in Memphis. One aspect of Memphis’ movement that characterizes much of the South is conservative politics. In recent years, a range of anti-LGBT legislation has been introduced in Tennessee. The organization on the forefront of fighting such legislation in the state is the Tennessee Equality Project (TEP), which works on the local level to create statewide change (Tennessee Equality Project). The TEP first introduced an anti-discrimination ordinance that would protect LGBT city employees from discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression in Memphis in 2008 and again in 2010, but the measure failed to pass both times. The first time the proposition was withdrawn
due to lack of support from the Memphis community and negative responses from certain members of the Memphis city council. The second time the ordinance was introduced, the measure died on the second reading. Only a broad anti-discrimination measure that bans “discrimination against any Shelby County government employees on the basis of non-merit factors” that does not mention sexual orientation and does not extend to city employees was able to pass (Appendix E, Connolly). Nevertheless, this was seen as a beginning to progress. After a similar anti-discrimination ordinance passed in Nashville, however, a measure called the Special Access to Discrimination Act (with the appropriate acronym, ‘SAD’) was passed at the state level, negating Nashville’s ordinance and preventing any city or county in Tennessee from adopting similar measures that address sexual orientation specifically. That piece of legislation is currently being challenged by the TEP (Appendix E, Tennessee Equality Project).

A bill dubbed the “don’t say gay” bill (HB0229), which would prevent teachers from discussing homosexuality in the classroom before ninth grade, was originally sponsored by Representative Bill Dunn in 2011 (“Don’t Say Gay Bill Stalls”). The proposed bill was met with much protest in Tennessee, gaining national media attention, especially after controversial statements made by backer Representative Stacey Campfield, including, “Most people realize that AIDS came from the homosexual community—it was one guy screwing a monkey, if I recall correctly, and then having sex with men” (“Stacey Campfield, Tennessee Senator”). Though the bill passed the Senate and House, its enactment has been stalled, since, according to Dunn, “we found out there really is not sex education curriculum in K-8 right now” (“Don’t Say Gay stalls”). Indeed, sex education is not required in Tennessee, but if it is taught, teachers must adhere to strict abstinence only guidelines (“STDs, HIV/AIDS”). Supporters of the ‘don’t say gay’ bill have now opted to pursue a sex education bill (HB3621), one that raises serious public
Anti-LGBT legislation in Tennessee and Memphis reveals the homophobia perpetuated by conservatism in the region. Notably, this legislation has not been received without pushback. LGBTs, activists, and straight allies of Tennessee have responded to the bigotry represented by these proposed laws. As I demonstrate in greater detail in the first chapter, the TEP incorporates a range of defensive strategies in order to combat such laws, though fighting bad bills is just one strategy the organization uses. In recent years, the TEP has gone from “being on the defensive to the offensive” because of the changing social climate in regards to LGBTs and LGBT rights (Appendix E). The TEP finds sponsors to promote bills that prevent bullying, provides resources to people who have been discriminated against at work, and is heavily involved in city council elections among other activities. A growing local movement that involves not only the TEP, but other organizations including the MGLCC, progressive churches, and other groups in Memphis has been developing since the early part of the decade. I demonstrate movement challenges specific to Memphis, as well as the intersections of activism and conservatism that have shaped the course of the local movement in recent years. I also show how conservatism, racism, religiosity, and other aspects of region affect LGBT Memphian’s everyday lives, the ways they negotiate their identities as a result, and the political implications of those identity formations.
5. Chapter Summaries

Chapter one of this work focuses on aspects of place that shape the LGBT community and movement of Memphis. I highlight the city’s paradoxes, with certain parts of Memphis that are very open and progressive and others that can be hostile. I outline aspects of the physical landscape that have been conducive to such alternative, grassroots movements as the Memphis movement. I discuss the MGLCC as a space within a place, and its importance to the LGBT community in a generally not-so-LGBT-friendly city. I demonstrate the ways LGBT Memphians negotiate their identity as a result of Memphis’ paradoxes. I also show the range of LGBT experiences in the city, highlighting the difference in trans experience and political issues of interest across lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identity. Transgenders, though included in “LGBT,” often face tremendous disadvantages as a result of their greater stigmatization nationwide. I also show aspects of place that shape their lives in Memphis. Highlighting the breadth of political issues that some LGBTs hold more important than others, I show how aspects of region affect their political concerns. I expand on challenges, goals and strategies specific to Memphis as well as aspects of the local movement in line with the national movement for LGBT rights. Finally, I discuss the many reasons why, despite the lack of legal protections and resources available to LGBTs in other places, LGBTs enjoy and remain in the city of Memphis.

Chapter two’s focus is on race and divisions that exist within the black and white LGBT communities of Memphis in light of the city’s history of racial struggle. I start with a discussion of Memphis Black Gay Pride as a symbol of racial division, as black gay prides exist across the county in locations that remain segregated. I also discuss Memphis Black Gay Pride as an important political statement and outlet that promotes visibility among a community often
rendered invisible. I note class differences among the black community and aspects of class that shape the two pride parades, Black Gay Pride and Mid-South Pride, in Memphis. Demonstrating some of the differences in black-white LGBT experience that make separate pride celebrations necessary, I highlight intersections of sexuality, race, gender, class, and region that shape black LGBT identity in Memphis. I show the various ways black LGBTs construct their identities as a result of those intersections and their political implications. I also bring in a discussion of the black church and its often contradictory role in the lives of black LGBTs, along with aspects of place that shape black LGBTs’ religious experiences there. Using E. Patrick Johnson’s work on black gay identity along with the interviews from black LGBT Memphians, I hope to expose certain limitations placed upon black LGBTs, arguing for multiple definitions of “blackness” and challenging common misconceptions of homophobia in the African American community.

The final chapter focuses on church involvement in the Memphis LGBT movement and intersections of conservatism and activism that have shaped its course. I show the different ways local activists and progressive churches have responded to religious opposition with a Christian message of equality in Memphis. Within a conservative atmosphere that often pits LGBTs against Christians, secular LGBT groups and progressive churches in Memphis have become involved in organizing on the issue of LGBT rights, helping to bridge a perceived disconnect between the LGBT community and faith communities. Progressive and Open and Affirming or welcoming churches have also helped alleviate racial divisions in Memphis, as many work intentionally to create diversity in their congregations, and also work with predominantly African American churches on other issues of justice and equality within the community at large. Addressing the African American church’s legacy within the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis, I demonstrate some of the ironies, paradoxes, and connections involved in civil rights
and LGBT rights discourse in Memphis. Noting the ways social and political issues operate differently in black and white church communities, I complicate notions of homophobia within the African American church. Finally, I show the significance of progressive churches’ involvement in the local movement and their powerful social and political influence.
II: “A LOT OF LITTLE ISLANDS:” MEMPHIS LGBT LIFE, ACTIVISM, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE

Amy Ulmer: Do you feel like Memphis is a welcoming place for LGBTs?

Eddie Wiley: Not all parts of Memphis. As a whole, it’s not as progressive as other larger cities. I do see more people being, not accustomed to it, I don’t want to say getting used to it, but becoming more aware that the community is here and that’s it not going anywhere, and I think Midtown is, like, super equality and everything like that, but there’s certain parts where you go where it’s like you see people whispering, or you can see it in their eyes, ‘Ooh, that’s a gay guy’ or ‘That’s’ a lesbian’ or something (Appendix O).

1. Introduction

Those interviewed for this project all agreed that Memphis is not a welcoming place for LGBTs overall. However, they also agreed that certain spaces—bars, the MGLCC, churches, university groups—were incredibly warm and open. According to Vincent Astor, LGBT historian and active member of the community, “Memphis is a lot of little islands, a lot of different groups that don’t necessarily get together much at all. There’s plenty of gay life…it’s not like the districts in San Francisco and in Chicago and in Houston, you know, where there’s a whole district where you can go there and say, ‘Well, this is queer land’” (Appendix C). This chapter focuses on the physical and social aspects of Memphis that have shaped the local LGBT movement and the ways LGBTs negotiate their identities due to the nature of the city. A
discussion of the political interests and the changes LGBT Memphians would like to see take place brings to light the lack of legislation benefitting their quality of life on the local, state and national level. I show the ways certain organizations in Memphis are addressing these issues and how activism has operated in light of Memphis’ conservatism. I conclude by demonstrating the various aspects of Memphis that LGBTs enjoy despite its downfalls, the most important being that Memphis is “home,” which goes beyond simply living in the city, but holds greater meaning.

2. A Space within a Place: The Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center

According to LGBT Memphians, because of the nature of Memphis, it is hard to speak of one LGBT “community.” Memphis lacks the same kind of queer life that, as in other metropolitan areas in and outside of the South, allows a person to “spend your whole time in the gay community and never have to step out,” according to Mary Helen Looper, a white lesbian of sixty years who speaks of her time spent in D.C. (Appendix J). In Memphis, the Gay and Lesbian Community Center (MGLCC) is one space where LGBTs can go and find some sense of community. Within a city that “can be hostile physically, more so emotionally and mentally,” the center serves as an “oasis that you can come if you need to” for many LGBTs (Appendix B, Appendix D). The MGLCC began in 1989, starting out in a garage apartment and moving to several different locations before ending up on Cooper Street in Midtown and has grown considerably since then (Appendix C). Midtown is a progressive, racially mixed, middle class, artsy area. This mix of progressivism, racial integration, and creativity make Midtown a likely district for such grassroots, alternative movements as the local LGBT movement to develop (Lloyd). The center is located down the street from a large LGBT friendly church, First Congregational United Church of Christ, which is home to the Mid-South Peace and Justice
Center. As one of the only gay and lesbian centers in the Mid-South, the center is an important resource for the LGBT community in Memphis, especially among youth, and does a tremendous amount with its small budget. For some of the LGBTs interviewed, it’s a place they go only every now and then. Others are there on a weekly basis. All agree, however, that just having the MGLCC, its physical structure standing as a queer space in Memphis, is highly significant.

According to Martavius, a twenty-four year old African American gay man and student at the University of Memphis, the MGLCC is a “very family-oriented place. I feel like it’s family away from family. It’s a great place. And I don’t feel like it’s only for LGBTs, it’s really for all of those that support LGBTQ rights. We have a lot of straight allies, so it’s really family-oriented” (Appendix I). As it is for Martavius, the MGLCC is like family or home for many LGBTs. Indeed, the center even resembles home, as its building is an old, renovated residence. In a city that functions as a multi-centered queer district with an LGBT community that is like “a lot of little islands,” the center provides a unified space for networking and community. For others, like Mike Robertson, a forty-one year old white man and higher education administrator who does not attend events at the center regularly, just knowing it is there is important:

You don’t drive up and down Memphis and see too many rainbow flags, at the bar maybe, but, so I think it’s pretty significant with that alone, that there’s a presence, a gay and lesbian center and a rainbow flag, is good. When you have a big city, you have people from all over, and I think those people coming from smaller towns, just seeing, just driving by, seeing it, would feel some comfort (Appendix M).

The rainbow flag flying outside of the building makes a major statement in the conservative southern city of Memphis—“We are here.” As Mike mentions, people not just from Memphis
drive by and see the flag, but LGBTs from surrounding small towns and rural communities might also gain meaning from its presence. Having a visible home space promotes positive self-esteem and sense of belonging despite the discrimination, and its physical presence brings visibility to the queer community within a heteronormative society.

According to Vincent Astor, the center makes an even stronger statement to older LGBTs:

People of my generation and people who came out in the years before I did are still absolutely in awe and wonder that this place exists because we ask ourselves what would it have been like, how much easier would it have been how much better would it have been if we had had some place we knew about where we could say “What is going on?” The people that did the marching are still in awe of this place (Appendix C).

For earlier generations of queer Memphians, the MGLCC is something they would not imagined to exist when they were growing up. The centers’ existence is a reflection of the changing social times, changes that have been slow but persistent. Today, the MGLCC serves as an important space for young LGBTs during a critical period in their life, as well as for the LGBT community as a whole. While all LGBTs interviewed agree that, overall, Memphis is not a welcoming place for LGBTs, they also agree that there are pockets of openness. The MGLCC is one of those spaces, and it makes a profound statement in the heart of the city.

3. Place, Discrimination, and Identity Negotiation

While I have argued for a broader definition of politics and activism, I also call for a broader conceptualization of discrimination. Discrimination may not always be outright and
blatant, but can also be subtle and unconscious. Often, discrimination is not easily identifiable, calling for a broader definition. Devon W. Carbado suggests that a perpetrator of discrimination is more than someone who acts intentionally to bring about a discriminatory result: “…I suggest that those of us who unquestionably accept the racial, gender, and heterosexual privileges we have—those of us who fail to acknowledge our victimless status with respect to racism, sexism, and homophobia—are also perpetrators of discrimination” (190). As Carbado posits, discrimination also exists in the way of a privileged person complacently accepting his or her advantaged position without resistance. Another way discrimination manifests is through microaggressions, which include subtle behaviors that invalidate or insult and perpetuate racism, sexism, and heterosexism (Jackson). These expressions have devastating effects on any marginalized group in society. Earlier, Eddie gave an example of a microaggression—someone whispering, “That’s a gay guy” (Appendix O). Discrimination may come in a variety of ways, from multiple points and via multiple modes, the basis of which are not always clear.

With Memphis and its “paradox of place,” as a city that is sometimes queer friendly and at others, violently hostile, LGBTs might experience discrimination at differing levels, and for reasons that do not solely pertain to sexuality, but that intersect with class status, race, ethnicity, gender, and gender presentation, as I demonstrate further in the next chapter. When I asked Mike Robertson to talk about his experiences with discrimination in Memphis, his response highlighted how ambiguous the nature of discrimination can be:

You know…I have had friends who once they found out I was gay, backed off, that’s not really true discrimination I guess, but kind of backed off, you know. But I really haven’t—I’ve never been turned down for a job or housing where I thought it was because I was gay, or not served somewhere. On the flip side of
that, I’ve not felt comfortable to hold hands with my partner in public in certain places, so is that discrimination? I don’t know, you tell me. But, so, in that aspect, I guess a little. But nothing major. At least that I can remember. I’m sure I’ve been called ‘fag’ and ‘queer’ and those kinds of things, you know, by a passerby or whatever, but nothing significant (Appendix M).

The idea of “true” discrimination reflects the common notion of discrimination as outright and intense. However, the examples Mike gives are also forms of discrimination, specifically, microaggressions—being rejected by friends on the basis of sexual orientation, receiving judgment for holding hands with one’s partner in public, and being called offensive names. Yet, while Robertson has experienced discrimination in these ways, he has not had any confrontations considered significant during his time in Memphis. While Robertson’s statement goes against notions of the South as extremely discriminatory and unpleasant for LGBTs to live, it also shows that being called derogatory names like “fag” may not be uncommon.

Mike also acknowledges that his sexuality may not be visible, and others may experience more instances of discrimination based on having non-normative gender presentations: “As people are more—lesbians who are more masculine, males who are more effeminate have a visible something that can cause discrimination and violence” (Appendix M). In Memphis, LGBTs find themselves negotiating their identities in different areas or during different circumstances to avoid added stress or potential harm. They report having to “butch it up” or “tone it down” if effeminate and a man, masculine and a woman, or “gender bending” in any way, depending on where they are in the city. They may feel comfortable being themselves at home, but lack that kind of freedom of gender identity or expression at work or school. Below,
we hear from Eddie, a gay black man and bank teller who elaborates on the sort of negotiations he makes on a regular basis.

Even though I say I’m just Eddie, sometimes I’m like, ‘Oh, it’s OK to be feminine here, you have to be masculine here,’ and most of the times you can’t always be Eddie. You have to butch it up sometimes even though I hate to do it, but at the end of the day it’s inevitable. There are some places where you go, you can’t be, you know, flaming, but that’s hopefully, like I said, that will change, because you need to be who you are wherever. You don’t see a straight guy out saying ’Oh I have to be this way, I have to be straight, I have to do this, I have to do that.’ They just live their life. It’s a struggle (Appendix O).

Eddie brings up an important point—that heterosexuals, because of their normative identities and gender presentations, do not have to be conscious of these issues surrounding sexuality. With other gays and lesbians, too, their sexual orientation may be less visible, though they are probably more aware of their surroundings. While Eddie describes himself as “not flamboyant,” he is also “not a thug, man’s man,” but has a style of dress and demeanor that might make his sexual identity more visible (Appendix O). Because of the nature of Memphis and stigma placed upon LGBTs, Eddie has to “butch it up” at times to make life a little easier. AJ, a twenty-six year old pest controller who identifies as a stud or dominant lesbian, negotiates her identity in similar ways.

Sometimes I may need to tone who I am down. My voice may need to be a little more feminine than usual, and that’s OK with me. You know, because a lot of people haven’t caught up with the times. And like I said, when I was younger, I’d be ready to flaunt it in anybody’s face that I wanted to. But now that I’m older
and I know bills have to be paid, I can cut back. But it doesn’t change who I am inside, it’s just having respect for the other person. Not throwing it in their faces.

You know, people respect you more for that… (Appendix H).

AJ mentions not “flaunting” her sexuality, which, though LGBTs may be considered to “flaunt” it, again, this standard is not held for heterosexuals in the same sense. AJ says that now that she has adult responsibilities, she feels less of a need to “flaunt it in anybody’s face,” which is probably also due to the fact that she is now more resolute in her identity than earlier years, as she shared with me. AJ also shows that she is aware of her role as a political actor in everyday life, although she does not feel the need to make a statement in every testy situation. She mentions that by negotiating her identity in this way, she is not “changing who she is,” though she might need to change her presentation just to get by with less stress in everyday situations. It is also important to note that AJ and Eddie are African Americans, and when discussing issues of identity, race and sexuality cannot be separated as they are always relational. As people with multiple minority identities, the intersecting factors of race and sexuality play into their experiences. I analyze how these sections operate in greater detail in the following chapter.

Mark Mitchell, a forty-nine year old transgender in transition from male to female who teaches aviation in Memphis also negotiates his identity at times, especially in the work setting: “You know, people in aviation are, you know, super jock or he-man. You really have to put on a façade, get really good at being an actor. Because you can’t, you’re expected to be one way and you’re really something else, but it’s just what you have to do” (Appendix L). Because of the masculine atmosphere of his workplace, Mark does not fit the typical mold of what he is expected to, becoming “really good at being an actor” (Appendix L). Mark notes that there is a necessity to the negotiations he makes in his workplace, being something that he has to do to get
by, while at home, he is free to express himself without the threat of being judged or bothered. AJ, Mark, and Eddie were not the only ones who reported negotiating their identities according to certain situations, which was described as pretty every day and routine. The examples demonstrate how place affects everyday LGBT life in Memphis.

4. The “T” in LGBT: Transgender Life in Memphis

This section focuses on the experiences of Memphis transgenders, which differ from those of LGBs in many ways. The three transgender individuals, all male to female transgenders who volunteered to speak with me, often had difficult times coming out and gaining support. Transgender Memphians share both experiences of transgender people nationwide, as well as issues specific to Memphis and Tennessee. On a national scale, the key issues surrounding the transgender community involve violence, discrimination, access to healthcare, birth certificate modifications, and higher rates of unemployment (“National Transgender”). As people who do not identify with their biological sex, a common frustration expressed by trans individuals involves the widespread societal misunderstanding of the fluidity of sex, gender, and sexuality. A second misunderstanding involves the representation of transgenders as abnormal or having a mental illness, with gender identity disorder being a common diagnosis among trans people.

Beth Bates, a fifty-six year old white male to female transgender and retired medical researcher who now works as a physical trainer elaborates on some of these issues:

What most people see in the press and the media and so forth is the extreme bad, and the extreme that doesn’t present, well, this is just a normal person who has had this transition or who is a normal person functioning in society, maybe a doctor, maybe a lawyer, maybe a politician, maybe a school teacher, maybe a
whatever. They’re just a normal person, and that’s not hardly ever portrayed to the public. And one reason is people like me don’t really want to go out there and say, ‘Yes this is me, yes I transitioned, yes this is ..’, because once you do that there’s no pulling back. You can’t let those words back in the bottle, and then you become a subject of hate crimes, and you can become targets of discrimination openly and secretively, and you present, if you have family, all of your family becomes targets, and I’m not willing to do that at all (Appendix D).

Beth gives a sense of the kinds of issues transgender individuals face nationally. Fearing what will happen as a result, Beth does not identify openly as transgender. According to Sara who identifies openly as a male to female transgender and is a student at the University of Memphis, many transgenders “don’t identify as trans, they identify as their actual gender, which is perfectly understandable” (Appendix N). Transgenders might not feel like they have anything to “come out” to, identifying with their transitioned gender. Mark, the transitioning male to female who works in aviation, says that others “don’t come out because they don’t feel they will be accepted…I think when it comes to transgenders, people will listen, but they don’t understand. And I think that’s the biggest thing. So if they don’t understand it, they fear it” (Appendix L). In Memphis, several transgender deaths, most recently, Duanna Johnson in 2008, caused increased anxiety among a community that already remains largely secretive. Though these types of hate crimes occur nationwide, several transgenders believe living in the South presents an added disadvantage:

**Ulmer:** Do you feel like the South as opposed to the non-South might be more discriminatory?
**Bates:** It’s national, but it’s more prominent I think in the South. There’s just religion-based conservative values more here. When I was transitioning, I lived in Mississippi. I did live in Mississippi for four years, and that was an experience. Just south of here in Hernando. So I still worked in Memphis. And, yep, right down the road was the Buster Keaton American Legion Lodge that flew the rebel flag and rode all the motorcycles, and you didn’t go by there on Saturday night unless you were one of the good ole boys. So discrimination is real prevalent I think in the South, but it’s nationwide (Appendix D).

Interestingly, Beth’s statement connects signs of racism with signs that trans or lesbian and gay individuals would not be welcome. Equating “Old South” racism to a heterosexist and misogynist culture that makes LGBTs feel uncomfortable, Beth connects racism, sexism and heterosexism. Again, this shows that there are multiple connections between and intersections of LGBT experiences and broader social issues of marginalized people, and region certainly shapes those experiences and issues.

Indeed, several point to the small town nature, religiosity, and lack of education and legal protections in the region as major barriers to gaining respect. However, Mark does not believe that the discrimination he faces is more of a southern phenomenon. He feels that in Memphis particularly, religion plays a major role in this fear-based discrimination: “I don’t know if it’s primarily the South. I think in this area here, people speak out a lot more against it and speak out more than other places because religion here is really prevalent” (Appendix L). Sara, also, though she has not experienced blatant discrimination or harassment, says she steers clear of religious fanatics:
For the most part, the attitudes I’ve faced here in Memphis have been moderate. I haven’t run into complete and utter, ‘Oh, that’s just something that’s abominable,’ however, I don’t hang out with people that are Bellevue or First Baptist or, yeah, there’s like a whole list of people, a whole list of religious organizations that as a rule I stay away from (Appendix N).

Another aspect of place that affects transgenders living in Memphis involves the state’s birth certificate laws—Tennessee is one of only a few states in the nation that does not allow for birth certificate modifications (“State Laws and Legislation”). Because the trans individuals interviewed are from Arkansas, Minnesota, and Florida, they were able to change their birth certificates in their home states, and thus acquired Tennessee driver’s licenses that show their appropriate gender. Other regional disadvantages involve access to healthcare for transgenders. Mark went through nearly eight doctors in Memphis before he found one that would issue hormone therapy, which is not uncommon for transgenders in the area. As Beth shows, this is due to the lack of medical resources available in Memphis:

And that, access to health care, for people who are thinking about transitioning need psychological counseling before they begin transitioning, trying to go through the appropriate steps to transition, there’s nothing here. There’s basically almost no network. They have a group here that I haven’t met with that’s the Perpetual Transitions group that I’m sure they use, you know, some physicians, but mental health facilities healthcare, there’s not enough networking (Appendix D).

These issues merely brush the surface of transgender experience nationally and locally in Memphis. According to Mark, “transgenders in Memphis are where lesbians and gays were back
in the seventies, just starting to come out and just starting to win the acceptance that we’re regular people” (Appendix L). While hostility towards trans individuals remains strong, groups like the Tennessee Transgender Political Coalition (TTPC) and individuals like State Senator Beverly Marerro and House Representative Jeanne Richardson, both from Memphis, are working for issues such as birth certificate modification in Tennessee (Appendix E, *Tennessee Transgender*). However, those interviewed feel that there is not enough being done within the movement on the local, state, or national level.

The experiences of Memphis transgenders, though similar to those of gays and lesbians, are distinct in several ways. While stigma surrounding LGBs has decreased significantly, transgenders face greater discrimination, which is heavily due to a lack of understanding of transgender issues and the varying ways sex, gender, and sexuality might operate. Moreover, transgender political issues differ considerably from those of LGBs. According to Martavius, a gay African American male, “I understand why we are together, the term queer as an umbrella term for everything, because we do share similar struggles, but there are some things that are completely distinct and overlooked. There are people that say ‘gay and lesbian’ rights, but you’re leaving out other people when you say that. Gay rights are completely different from transgender rights” (Appendix I). The next section focuses on LGBT political issues as a whole, but also reveals the differences in transgender and LGB rights issues.

5. LGBT Memphian’s’ Political Interests

As I have outlined so far, place strongly shapes the experiences of LGBTs and the ways they might negotiate their identities. LGBT Memphians’ experiences range across the “L,” “G,” “B,” and “T.” This also means that LGBTs have a range of political interests, with some issues
considered more important than others. In Memphis, because there is a lack of legislation benfitting LGBTs, that range is even greater. In Tennessee, several proposed pieces of legislation deem LGBTs second class citizens, such as the Special Access to Discrimination (SAD) Act and the “don’t say gay” bill. Memphis also lacks an ordinance protecting LGBT city employees from discrimination, though several attempts have been made to have one passed. LGBT police officers, EMTs, firefighters, and park service workers, many of whom have experienced instances of sexual harassment based on sexual orientation, have no legal recourse for such instances of discrimination (Appendix E). This section focuses on LGBT Memphians range of political concerns and how a lack of certain laws affects their lives.

Martavius brings up the need for marriage, adoption, hate crimes laws, and protection against intimate partner violence:

Even if I don’t want to get married, I feel that we should have the right to do so, so marriage and adoption. Making sure that our hate crimes are taken care of, reported, and that’s on both sides, as well as senior LGBTQs. That’s something that we don’t talk about, and I feel that we need to raise awareness about that and intimate partner violence in the community. I feel there’s still, like, we know it happens but people don’t want to take it seriously. And in the schools there’s this “don’t say gay” bill that’s in session right now, stuff like that, that’s why the South tends to move slowly because of stuff like that. That’s unnecessary (Appendix I).

Great amounts of time have been wasted on arbitrary bills like “don’t say gay,” which was supposed to prevent teachers from discussing homosexuality before ninth grade even though there is no sex education in kindergarten through eighth grades in the state of Tennessee, and
young students go largely uninformed of LGBT issues in school anyway. As Martavius notes, the attention given to such bills while other issues go ignored inhibits progress in the South.

AJ brings up the need for protection against discrimination:

I was almost, almost discriminated against at my job. We have a trip that they do every year…and I’m talking about taking my significant other with me when my boss tells me that he didn’t know if it was going to be OK to do that. Now I would have a leg to stand on, but then again, I wouldn’t’ because there’s no discrimination for sexual orientation on anything in Memphis, and they need that (Appendix H).

While many argue that anti-discrimination laws are difficult to enforce, this is one pretty clear example of discrimination. AJ calls the instance “almost” discrimination because, in the end, her department manager allowed the partner to attend, but otherwise, there would be no recourse for AJ. This instance serves as an example of microagression, which can cause profound, negative psychological effects.

Beth discusses other public policy concerns:

The marriage laws must change. It has to become a national, same-sex marriage must become available to all. Right now I could go and get married to a man. Because my birth certificate, everything else says female, and then someone would come up and the legalities of that would still be questioned. It’s one of those, you know, and the education curriculum in our whole system is so skewed towards straight everything, no deviation from anything, and there’s still not enough separation between church and state. It’s getting worse and not better (Appendix D).
Beth holds marriage, education reform, and separation between church and state extremely important, highlighting some of the ironies involved in current laws. Improvement of Tennessee’s education system is particularly significant, as education is the strongest factor in alleviating negative attitudes towards minority groups. As we have seen, lack of separation between church and state continues to pervade Tennessee’s politics, as well as southern politics in general.

Sara expands on transgender issues that should be protected by law:

I really want to see a national law come through, just something on the national level that says ‘Hey these people exist, ‘Hey, this is the process for which social security is going to work now,’ as far as transgender people…then from there, everything has to adhere to the national level, and that actually be part of it as, ‘Yes we do believe in state’s rights, but this is people’s rights, and states are trying to take away peoples’ rights protected by the constitution, so no, you have to actually adhere to our social security law,’ is kind of what I’d like to see come through…I would like to see the ‘don’t say gay’ bill and Special Access to Discrimination Act up and vanish (Appendix N).

Something I want to highlight that goes along with Sara’s sentiment involving freedom and “people’s rights protected by the constitution,” along with the concern for marriage that others express, is the conservative, middle class nature of such arguments. Because marriage is fundamentally middle class, the majority of respondents consider the issue very important. Other LGBTs, along with many queer activists critique marriage as a patriarchal institution that not only privileges straight people over LGBTs, but also discriminates against people of other non-normative sexualities, non-traditional relationships, single people, and those who do not wish to
marry (Warner 769). While conservative right wingers make “gay marriage” out to be a radically liberal issue that would supposedly dismantle societal structure, conservative LGBTs such as Andrew Sullivan posit that the heart of the argument for marriage lies with conservative values of committed relationships and stable families. That the majority of middle class LGBT Memphians that make up my sample are concerned with marriage should not suggest that all LGBTs are concerned with such issues. Nevertheless, the various concerns regarding marriage, adoption, healthcare, discrimination, hate crimes, and other issues, some considered more important than others by individual LGBTs, demonstrates the various lack of protections that affect Memphis LGBT life.

6. Intersections of Activism and Conservatism: The Memphis Movement

The local LGBT movement of Memphis has similar goals and strategies to that of the national movement for LGBT rights. However, several aspects of place make the local movement in Memphis exceptional. As I have shown, in Tennessee, there is not only a lack of legislation benefitting LGBTs, but also proposed anti-LGBT laws that attempt to block any sort of gains that might occur. But Tennessee LGBTs, straight allies, and activists are not passively enduring such injustice. In recent years, the push for LGBT rights in Memphis and Tennessee has increased. The organization on the forefront of challenging anti-LGBT legislation in the state is the Tennessee Equality Project (TEP), an LGBT organization founded in 2004 that works on the local level to create statewide change (Tennessee Equality Project). Public officials working for LGBT rights in Memphis include Jonathan Cole of the Shelby County TEP, Commissioner Steve Mulroy, and attorney at law Susan Mackenzie among others. In this section, I present data from my interview with Michelle Bliss, vice chair of the Shelby County chapter of the TEP, who
gives her perspective on LGBT movement challenges specific to Memphis, as well as how the TEP’s strategies have evolved in light of enduring conservatism and a changing social climate.

**Ulmer:** How might the Memphis movement be unique in comparison to other southern cities?

**Bliss:** I don’t know that we are unique. I think we face, although I will have to say that religion, race, and politics are so intertwined here, probably more so than Atlanta, although I can’t say that definitively, it feels like they are more intertwined here, and the state of Tennessee as a whole being very right leaning, a very strong presence in the evangelical movement of course with the Southern Baptist Convention and LifeWay being the publisher for all the evangelical materials in Nashville, I think that we have probably more organized opposition, and so we have to be more organized, more proactive. But I think the struggle is the same everywhere. It’s the struggle to be seen, and it’s a struggle to be seen as people and not as ‘that gay person.’ Or as my neighbor, my co-worker, and accepted for that (Appendix E).

Bliss notes the deep-rooted and intertwined nature of religion, race, and politics in Memphis as well as other areas of the South. Extremely organized, well funded opposition coming from religious right organizations that already have infrastructures in place allow such groups to respond quickly to what they consider their “moral” prerogatives. This is one aspect of place that influences the local and state movement, though the basis of the nationwide struggle remains the same and in line with broader social movement goals. Bliss also mentions a “feeling” about the conservatism and entangled nature of religion, race, and politics. While
feeling and perception do not always fully reflect reality, they may be driving strategies that affect how the movement operates.

Bliss continues on the challenges specific to Memphis, discussing the role of race in the local movement.

We have additional challenges in Memphis because we have challenges in the African American community gaining acceptance. It’s sometimes very difficult to outreach to that community because there is a large black church movement that does not support LGBT rights among their own community…Sometimes it’s seen as a white male movement, and it’s not (Appendix E).

The movement in Memphis, with a majority black population and its history of civil rights, is often marked by racial division within the city at large. As Bliss shows, the perceived “whiteness” of the movement may contribute to the lack of, or perceived lack of, involvement among African Americans. Again, perception of the reality of place and space shapes the way the movement functions as much as actuality. Two perceptions are at work in Bliss’s statement: black people’s perception of the movement as white along with white’s perceptions of the unwillingness of blacks to participate in the movement. Often, the reality of the movement is more complicated than such perceptions allow, with a few outspoken black leaders obscuring the kind of work that African American churches do. The next chapter delves further into the ways LGBT issues function differently in black and white communities, along with the ways diversity issues have been addressed within the local community and movement. The legacy of the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis and how it influences the local LGBT movement will be discussed in the final chapter.
Along with race, the conservative social atmosphere of Memphis influences the movement. This environment differs from southern cities like Atlanta, whose motto has been “the city too busy to hate” for over half a century. This is part of the city’s progressive image that began developing during the civil rights movement and is now reflected in Atlanta’s active LGBT community and movement. Bliss responds to the question of how Memphis differs from more progressive southern cities and the ways such differences shape the movement:

Some of that is, I think, entrenched Old South thinking. You know, we are on the border of Arkansas and Mississippi. We are surrounded by rural counties. Which, so is Nashville, but Nashville has positioned itself differently and there’s also a large art scene, which, even though it’s country music, you are talking about people who are artistic and progressive and probably more familiar or more comfortable around people of other sexual orientations and gender persuasions (Appendix E).

While Memphis and Nashville are similar in their mixed rural and urban nature, and both have sizable art scenes, Nashville lacks the sort of Delta history that continues to define Memphis. But like Nashville, Memphis is also a sort of liberal pocket within an extremely conservative state, consistently voting Democrat while the rest of Tennessee goes Republican (Ross). Like Memphis, southern cities and college towns including Fayetteville, Arkansas and Athens, Georgia, which have become the seats of activism in those southern states, have strong art scenes and a class of alternative, often educated people that have helped develop those local movements. These southern cities exemplify pockets of liberalism within largely conservative states.
Despite conservatism posing some challenges in Memphis, Bliss says that movement advancement depends on reaching out to people who otherwise might not become involved:

- There are progressives in every small town everywhere. There are people who don’t go with the status quo. And part of our challenge, and part of every equality organization’s challenge, is getting them involved. Because you have to shake them out of their comfort zone sometimes—‘Well, yeah, I’m gay and in a small town, but everybody knows me and my family, so no one bothers me.’ Well, the guy in the next town may not be so lucky. But that’s the kind of thing that’s always a challenge. I think that’s all over the South (Appendix E).

Bliss’s contention about small town southern gay life around Memphis goes along with what Daneel Buring writes about the city’s lesbian and gay history from the 1940s through the 1980s. According to Buring, “what appears to distinguish the Memphis lesbian and gay experience in terms of Southern culture is the force of social conservatism which keeps Southern lesbians and gay men from getting involved or ‘rocking the boat’” (226). Indeed, as Bliss points out, even getting LGBTs involved can be a challenge. While Buring’s perspective is contextualized by a decline of LGBT activism in Memphis beginning in the nineties, since then, the movement has certainly grown, and activism has been on the rise largely due to the changing social environment, according to Bliss: “I think we (TEP) are more pro-active now, and I think the climate, it’s easier to be proactive now than it was to be ten years ago” (Appendix E). On the national level, with gains like the potential end of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” marriage for LGBTs in several states including Maryland most recently, the political landscape is quickly evolving. Bliss says she envisions “a whole new set of battles” for TEP in the future: “I don’t see us going away, although my ultimate goal
would be for us to be completely irrelevant, and for us to be able to quit doing this and just lead our lives” (Appendix E).

7. The Queer South: Why LGBTs Choose Memphis

In an article entitled “Should Gays Leave the South?,” University of Memphis student Kyle Luebke responds to a common notion that places blame on LGBT southerners for choosing to live in such an intolerant region as the South; “They can’t understand why we won’t pick up and move to places where we won’t be fired because of our sexual orientation or gender identity; and they can’t understand why we stay in states where religious leaders and politicians are able to spew vitriol, lies, and hatred openly about our community” (Luebke). Luebke goes on to say that he considers Tennessee home, and that simply retreating to a more progressive area would be cowardly; “I see the South as having the potential to be a haven for LGBT people, and I am thankful that there are people in my life who have stuck it out, fought the good fight against the constant barrage of hatred and discrimination, and who strive to make an impact for our community each and every day” (Luebke). Despite the challenges that come with LGBT life in Memphis, most queer Memphians do not aspire to leave. In fact, the South continues to be the number one migration destination for internal migrants, and LGBTs are no different (“Map: U.S. Migration Flows”). Data from the United States Census Bureau also show that the South is home to the greatest number of same-sex couples with children (Tavernise). LGBTs enjoy Memphis for many reasons, including the business opportunities, diversity, its size and close proximity to other cities, the hospitality and “down home-ness,” the food, music, arts, history, education, and slower pace of life, just to name a few. Others mentioned wanting to stay and help the city
become a better place for future LGBTs. Below, LGBT Memphians offer their perspectives about what they like about their city and the South, along with some of its downfalls.

**Martavius:** I guess my philosophy in life is if you want to see change you have to get up and do something about it...I truly believe in that, so I wanted to stay and help Memphis build…The only thing I can really say about the South is that I get the whole generosity, for people that I know from other parts of the country, they really respect southern hospitality. And that’s one thing I notice and I’m like, well, that’s a good thing. In Memphis, other than just typical food, music, you have to decide. There’s good arts, culture, there’s good education here, some good agencies. We have some wonderful hospitals—St. Jude…there’s some good agencies here and a lot of people don’t, you always hear the negative things, but there’s good things in Memphis (Appendix I).

Martavius covers a variety of perks about Memphis: the hospitality, arts, culture, education, and major businesses. He also feels that Memphis needs a lot of work. His goal of helping Memphis progress is reflected in the service he contributes to several organizations including the MGLCC, Planned Parenthood, and TEP. According to Martavius, “People like to runaway to the big cities like Atlanta, which is fine if you have opportunities, but some people have to stay behind and help build the city up…You need very intelligent, motivated people to stay to help Memphis build and not just be number one in crime, number one in whatever” (Appendix I).

Others, like Sara, a student at the university, also want to make Memphis a better place, although she has a complicated love/hate relationship with the city:
I love Memphis, I’m not really sure why. It feels the most place like home. There’s no real tie to Memphis whatsoever, but, at the same time, I feel this connection to Memphis. I want to stay in Memphis to try to make it a better place. As far as liking it, I despise it. I want to see it become something better. Until that happens, I hate Memphis (Appendix N).

While it sounds like Sara likes Memphis overall but hates certain aspects of the city, Eddie, a bank teller of Memphis offers a more upbeat narrative:

The biggest thing that I like about Memphis is that there are so many opportunities, because you have different outlets for your career, your professional life, your personal life, your spiritual life. There’s a diverse group of people any group you go, you’re not always going to see the same type of person everywhere. And there’s just so much to offer here to me. I just love it. It’s hard to put it in words because its so...it’s almost a perfect size. Not a lot of people, not too small, sometimes it can feel like it, but I love it. A lot of people don’t but I love it to death (Appendix O).

While Eddie appreciates Memphis’ opportunities and diversity, Mike, a higher education administrator, points out the good food and friendliness, and also highlights some of the city’s paradoxes:

Would I leave the South again? I don’t know. Maybe. I’m pretty entrenched now. I like the South! I love the South, obviously, but you do, when you go to places that are more open and accepting, you do feel that difference. I love the food, can’t you tell? The down home-ness of the South, which is kind of funny because it’s a dichotomy, too, because in the gay community, at least in the male gay
community more often, one of the things I despised was the elitist snobbery, but that extends from the elitist snobbery in the South. I mean it’s kind of, like I said, a dichotomy of two different worlds. But, anyway, the relaxed nature, the friendly nature, that’s probably it in a nut shell…I’ve been to certain places where people just aren’t nice. So the niceness is the thing. And the laid back-ness (Appendix M).

“Feeling the difference” of social attitudes when traveling or living in certain areas outside of the South was common to several of the LGBTs interviewed. While Mike points out a genteel nature of Memphis that is characteristic of the South, at the same time, there is the “down home-ness,” the sincere, kind southern way that makes the region beloved for so many.

Like Mike, Reverend Paul Eknes-Tucker of Holy Trinity in Memphis talks about the difference in social atmosphere of places outside of the South, having preached in churches across the United States. Being from Birmingham, Eknes-Tucker also considers the South home and enjoys living in Memphis:

Coming back to the South is kind of like coming home…It’s always different in parts like Minnesota which has legal protections for GLBT folks that are much greater than places like the South, and where people are much more integrated into the fabric of community as just a part of it, so it is interesting to be back in the South again where you have to take a step back and say, ‘OK, this is not quite the same,’ although I’ve found Memphis to be a great place to be (Appendix G).
8. Conclusion

LGBT life in Memphis is marked by many paradoxes. While spaces of the city are inviting to LGBTs, others are less inviting, or perceived as such. The MGLCC is one space that has contributed tremendously to a sense of community among LGBTs in Memphis, and the environment surrounding its location in Midtown sustains the growing LGBT movement in the city. While Midtown is an open queer space, other parts of the city might require or encourage certain identity negotiations that influence daily LGBT life in Memphis. It is important to note the differences involved in transgender life to show the various issues concerning LGBT rights and the ways that place shapes transgenders’ lives. A range of issues is being addressed by the local Memphis movement, which faces several place related challenges including organized religious opposition and conservative politics. However, the movement has been growing and developing since the early 2000s, with the start of the Tennessee Equality Project (TEP) in 2004, which introduced a Memphis city ordinance and helped defeat the “don’t say gay” bill in recent years. I have demonstrated the importance of place by exhibiting some of the ways activism and conservatism have intersected within the local LGBT community and movement in Memphis.
III. BLACK AND GAY: RACE AND THE MEMPHIS LGBT COMMUNITY

Racially, I don’t feel that there is enough integration…from a lot of people who are aware of the community, as far as the black perspective goes, they feel that the white gay community does not understand the black gay community, and that their issues are not our issues, so to speak (Appendix B).

1. Introduction

Memphis, like other areas of South and country in general, is racially polarized. Interviewees all agree that there are major divisions among the white community and community of color in the city. Those divisions also exist in the LGBT community despite a common identity as sexual minorities. Some of the divisions have to do with differences in lived experience, often related to white privilege, class, and the social and economic realities of many people of color in the region. According to Michael Arceneaux in “Coming Out: Not as Simple as Black and White,” white LGBT people are “afforded certain privileges that many gays of color still are not” (2). LGBTs of color might face discrimination from multiple sites and via multiple modes, the basis of which are not always clear because of intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality. This chapter focuses on Memphis Black Gay Pride, class and racial divisions in the LGBT community, and the differences in lived experience of four black LGBT Memphians as racial and sexual minorities. Throughout, I hope to challenge and complicate notions of homophobia within the black community and African American church, as well as
demonstrate the various ways that black LGBTs identify and the political implications of those identity formations.

2. “Every Day is (white) Heterosexual Pride Day”: Memphis Black Gay Pride and Visibility

In Memphis, a city that is majority black, divisions between the white LGBT community and those of color are reflected by the two pride parades of the city—Mid-South Pride and Black Gay Pride. But Memphis is not an exception. Black gay prides exist in approximately twenty-five cities with substantial black populations, including D.C., Atlanta, Philadelphia, Houston, Chicago, Detroit, Oakland, Jackson, and New Orleans, areas that remain racially segregated in many respects (Cannick, “2012 Calendar”). These divisions are largely due to differences in lived experience that involve white privilege and the compounded minority statuses of black LGBT individuals. Martavius, a black gay man and student at the University of Memphis, describes the disconnect that the separate prides in Memphis represent:

…and because of the privilege, you know, that’s why there’s a separate Pride. We have Black Pride which is coming up and you have Mid-South Pride, which people from the African American community call ‘white pride.’ Now, if they actually called it the ‘white pride,’ there would be a riot, so that’s a type of disconnect (Appendix I).

Martavius’ statement brings up an aspect of “whiteness” that is important to address. Of course, the idea of a “white pride” celebrating LGBT identity is not only ridiculous because it sounds more like a celebration put on by the Klan, but also because white people do not “feel” their race the same way that black people do, as it is not made apparent in their daily lives. In this
way, the invisibility of whiteness is functioning to render invisible blackness, or black gayness. According to gay black scholar Devon W. Carbado,

…when I enter a department store, my ‘different’ identity signifies not only that I am black and male, but also that I am a potential criminal. My individual identity is lost in the social construction of black manhood. I can try to adopt race-negating strategies to challenge this dignity-destroying social meaning. I can work my identity (to attempt) to repudiate the stereotype. I might, for example, dress ‘respectable’ when I go shopping (193).

Carbado proceeds to show how white people, especially white, heterosexual men, do not have to think about employing such strategies or working their identities in such ways. According to Carbado, “Every day is (white) ‘Heterosexual Pride Day’” (206). While Carbado’s analysis refers to heterosexual whites and heteronormativity more generally, analysis of difference not across race, but mainly across sexuality, that is, between black gay and white gay people, sheds light on the affect of white privilege within the LGBT community and movement in Memphis. White gay privilege may have a significant impact in rendering blackness within the movement invisible and may also facilitate the hypervisibility of African American opposition within the movement.

Black Gay Prides are important because they allow LGBT African American’s visibility within an LGBT community and movement in which they are so often rendered invisible (Han 51). According to social and political commentator and black lesbian Jasmyne Cannick, autonomous black gay prides represent a disavowal of white queer norms, and that, “while most pride celebrations celebrate one’s sexual preference, for black gays they celebrate much more. They are cultural celebrations that affirm and empower a community of invisible people in a
climate of hostility from pastors, elected officials and sometimes our own family members” (Cannick). Below, black LGBT Memphians expand on this perspective as they acknowledge Memphis Black Gay Pride’s significance within the African American LGBT community.

According to Jermaine, a black, gay twenty-four year old material handler at Fed-Ex:

I definitely agree that there’s a major portrayal of the LGBT community being this upper-middle class white image, same-sex attracted image, that lacks visibility of other perspectives, or in depth of the minorities. You look at Logo [queer TV program and website], a good number you see on Logo as soon as you click on it are these vacations, spas where you see a bunch of white gay couples going to Cancun and Paris and all the—it’s almost being portraying that it’s all about living the fabulous, white life, but that’s just one of the things that’s doing a great disservice, but it’s crucial more than ever to have black gay images out there just for the sake of getting the black gay community to be a part of or feel like they are a part of the community…For the time being I think it is [important to have a separate Pride]…at least it helps to get us to establish and to acknowledge that we are black and gay and that we should not be ashamed of that, that there is nothing wrong with that (Appendix B).

Jermaine shows the importance of black LGBT visibility in the midst of white, specifically white, wealthy, LGBT images that pervade the media and other outlets. Black Gay Pride is significant because it allows people to openly celebrate the fact that they are black and gay and to take pride in that. It allows community when black gay people might not feel like a part of, or are excluded from, the LGBT community at large.
AJ highlights further some positive elements of Memphis Black Gay Pride:

The parade. Coming together. The coming together would be the positive.
Because we are so, I wouldn’t say we are divided, but the only time you see that many black people together is when Pride happens, or if they’re going to the club. But I guess the unity for standing up for what you believe in or who you are, and if they could just add some other positive it would be even more better (Appendix H).

AJ does not bring up black-white divisions, but the importance of African Americans uniting when they rarely have the opportunity, according to AJ. The coming together, just the physical presence of black LGBTs makes a statement that is especially important by celebrating and rendering visible being black and gay. That there are aspects of Memphis Black Gay Pride that could be better, according to AJ, brings me to a discussion of a black middle class politics of respectability as reflected in interviewees feelings about Memphis Black Gay Pride.

2.1 The Politics of Respectability: Class Divisions and Memphis Black Gay Pride

Jermaine and AJ both describe the black pride events as rather risqué, with an atmosphere of debauchery. Indeed, last year’s 2011 Memphis Black Gay Pride was themed “Sin City” and featured exotic dancers along with wet t-shirt and “sexy underwear” contests (“Memphis Black Gay Pride”). The LGBT African Americans interviewed, the majority of whom were middle class, expressed a preference for Mid-South Pride, which includes participants of all races and ethnicities and has a more toned down sexual atmosphere. This may be due to a long standing, middle class black “politics of respectability” being at work. According to Evelyn Brooks
Higginbotham who writes about the black Baptist women’s movement from 1880-1920, emphasizing manners, morals, cleanliness, and sexual purity through a politics of respectability allowed black churchwomen to counter racist images of themselves as “immoral, childlike, and unworthy of respect and protection” (186). Such identity working signified self-esteem and racial pride during an era when negative stereotyping and caricaturing pervaded films, school textbooks, art, and newspapers (188-189). Today, disparaging stereotypes of black people persist, and gay blacks in particular might feel more pressure to engage in this type of respectability politics. The middle class black LGBTs interviewed describe the sex and partying marking Memphis Black Gay Pride to be undesirable and unnecessary. They may be working to counter deviance and stigma attached to their sexuality as black as well as the deviance and stigma attached to their sexuality as gay. I present data from the black LGBTs, all of whom have attended Black Gay Pride at some point, and aspects of the celebration they consider negative.

**Jermaine:** I’ve participated in both (Mid-South and Black Gay Pride). I didn’t participate in Mid-South this year, unfortunately, because I had to work, but I heard that it was one of the best ones yet because it was truly integrated. It was black, white, you know, all the colors together, and I think that was one of the greatest accomplishments. But I do prefer that one (Mid-South) over the Black Gay Pride because, like I said, you know, unfortunately a lot of the black gay scenes and black gay aspects of Memphis, including Black Gay Pride revolve around sex and all those simplistic things. Even down to the flyers, you look at the flyers, the first thing you see is some guy with an oiled up six pack and some girl with a bikini on, and it’s just, like, all about selling sex. But we do have
functions during Black Gay Pride which are truly emotionally and mentally empowering (Appendix B).

Jermaine prefers the diversity of Mid-South Pride and rejects the sexual content of Black Gay Pride, which he considers a reflection of the black gay community of Memphis as a whole. Jermaine distances himself from such overt sexuality and “selling,” as he may be concerned with keeping up a “respectable” image that Black Gay Pride does not maintain. However, as he expresses earlier as well, Black Gay Pride is not altogether negative as it offers events that foster pride, belonging, and self-esteem within the African American LGBT community.

Like Jermaine, Eddie appreciates the diversity of Mid-South Pride, but does not mention the sexual content. Instead, he is more concerned with its exclusion of other races and ethnicities:

It’s kind of rough because I brought a white friend one time and we just got constant stares and constant looks and it’s like, it’s just another person, and I didn’t realize it was going to be such a big deal because, you know, a lot of people, they work with different races, but when it comes to the club it’s like, ‘This is my club’ like, ‘Why are you here? We don’t come to yours.’ And I’m like, this is different, not 1960, so anybody can come in… (Appendix O).

Eddie and the other black LGBTs’ perspectives reflect those of a younger generation, as all African Americans interviewed were in their twenties. As a result, their comfort with and desire for diversity may be attributed to their growing up in an era of decreased racial tension. Moreover, Eddie and Jermaine’s sentiment is particularly middle class, as they are more likely to have been exposed to whites and other racial and ethnic groups than the overwhelmingly black working class crowd that attends Black Gay Pride. Working class blacks are more likely to live in hypersegregated communities and attend segregated schools while Eddie and Jermaine may
have experienced greater diversity at work or school. Working class blacks also have a need for separate, private spaces that are in-group and function as sites of decompression from dealing with constant and damaging white racial microaggressions in public and on the job all week.

Like Jermaine and Eddie, AJ considers some aspects of Memphis Black Gay Pride unconstrucitive:

It’s crap. It’s crap. We are so stuck in, we are so stuck in drinking, having random sex, getting high, we are so stuck in the negative aspect—not the negative—but just one side of this life or any life that you live. It’s redundant. You know, they do the same thing every year, every year, every year, every year, and they never—Black Gay Pride in Memphis anyway—because I’ve never been to any other black gay pride, but Black Gay Pride in Memphis, they don’t touch on issues that we should know about. You know, they don’t have panels about AIDS or STDs or transgender community. They just want to party, have sex with each other, drink, and get high, from what I’ve experienced anyway, and the reason that I’ve experienced it, because I was with them at one point doing that, but as I’ve grown all that doesn’t make sense to me anymore. You know, I can get high and get drunk at home for free, you know. I don’t have to go and pay twenty dollars to watch some girl shake her ass on a pole, you know? (Appendix H).

AJ does not quite suggest that the sex, drinking, or drugs is altogether negative, but that it is a major focus of the parade. She notes the importance of having various panels and services that would educate the community, and is frustrated with the lack of variance in annual Black Gay Pride events. Several aspects of Mid South Pride, like panels that make the parade seem more like an academic conference promote a “professional” image and may be particularly appealing
to the middle class. On the other hand, Black Gay Pride is more about simple celebration than keeping up a certain image. A middle class politics of respectability may apply here, as AJ says she can do the same things in the privacy of her own home, although she is not fully disapproving of those activities.

The “in your face,” sex positive atmosphere surrounding Memphis Black Gay Pride calls for further discussion. When so often sex is divorced from political issues, including LGBT issues, putting sex “out there” makes an important statement that resists the norms of dominant society. Public sexuality forces others to see it and allows freedom of expression that has subversive qualities. The sexual nature of Black Gay Pride may also be a marker of class, since working class people are less likely to be concerned with keeping a “respectable” image than middle and upper classes. Notably, AJ mentions that she has never been to another black gay pride, acknowledging that others, which occur around the country, may be different. Indeed, the style of parade that exists in Memphis may be more characteristic of the South, particularly Memphis, with the continued marginalization of people of color in the city. According to the 2010 census, in Memphis, 28.6% of black residents live below the poverty line versus 9.6% of whites. Hispanics make up the largest number at 38.6 percent (Charlier 2). The two prides reflect the racial and class disparities that impact Memphis as a whole as well as the LGBT community.

3. “Quare Studies” and LGBT Racial Differences in Experience

Martavius: “…the ‘queer,’ you know, it’s very controversial in the community because there are some who just hate hearing the word. Like, if we were called ‘punk’ or something, I would be like, Oh, no, I don’t identify with that.” Because I didn’t get the queer—I got ‘sissy,’ ‘punk,’ ‘faggot’—I didn’t get ‘queer.’…But
in the South, we don’t typically use, it’s more like California and other regions that use ‘queer’ or ‘queer studies’ in their community. We use LGBTQ, which takes a long time, but I can understand because, especially for aging LGBTQs, that is completely offensive. That is like the equivalent of the ‘n’ word or the ‘b’ word or the ‘f’ word, so that’s another thing about the South, it’s a southern thing. We haven’t adapted to the whole change, and there is a race component to that, because queer is typically used by the Caucasian community, the African American community does not identify as queer” (Appendix I).

Martavius shows the term “queer” to have several limitations. First, there is a generational factor. Because older LGBTs grew up around the word “queer” used as a pejorative, perhaps before the term was attached political significance, they often resist the term. There is also a regional factor. As Martavius suggests, perhaps southerners are further behind, as many have not been exposed to the term in an academic setting or do not know the meaning outside of its derogatory context. Finally, there is a racial component. Black people, Martavius says, do not identify as queer, as it remains a term largely utilized by white people.

As an author of a book about black gay southern life and a black gay southerner himself, E. Patrick Johnson explores intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and region in “‘Quare’ Studies, or (almost) Everything I know about Queer Studies I Learned from my Grandmother” (124-157). Holding that “queer” is a term irrelevant to African Americans, he develops a “quare” theory. The term “quare” makes the distinction from queer, playing on Alice Walker’s concept of womanism versus feminism. Similarly, “quare” accounts for how racism and classism affect how people of color experience the world, where “queer” often fails to acknowledge class and racial privilege. Queer also fails to account for region, with the term “quare” reflecting Johnson’s
grandmother’s southern accent (124-125). Along with Martavius, Johnson agrees that “queer” is an insufficient term because it fails to address intersecting factors of race and sexuality. This section focuses on intersections of minority identities and the ways they manifest in the lives of black lesbian and gay Memphians.

AJ, as female, black, and lesbian has multiple minority statuses that interact in her life. She also has a non-normative gender presentation as a stud, or dominant lesbian. Therefore, she might face discrimination coming from multiple, intersecting points that may not be clear. According to AJ, however, race does not factor in:

If you put a white stud and a black stud together and put them in to the same situation, as far as going for the same job, let’s say we have our hair cut the same, are dressed the same, we have the exact same outfit on, there will be the same discrimination. Because people are so closed minded, and when I say people I mean just the general population, people are so closed minded to what homosexuality is, the fact that we still live very normal lives…(Appendix H).

Though AJ feels that the discrimination she faces comes most often from her masculine, stud gender presentation, which defies conventional norms. But this is complicated by her blackness, along with being lesbian, as those identities are all connected. According to AJ, femme lesbians are more respected because they adhere to traditional gender roles and may not be visibly gay, whereas studs, because their lesbian identity is visible, are attached greater stigma: “Society frowns on homosexuality. They are going to shun you when you can tell you’re gay. You can’t tell unless you dress dominantly…They (femmes) are not as criticized” (Flores). This shows how intersecting minority identities influence AJ’s experiences.
Martavius, as a black gay male, feels similarly about the role race plays in his life in terms of discrimination:

Honestly, with me, being African American doesn’t really affect me, because I think I get more of the gay thing, so that personally doesn’t affect me, and I’m not saying that I never face any discrimination on that, it may be something behind the doors or something, but that’s probably related to me being openly gay. I don’t hide it, it’s going be visible somehow, so I’m going to be open. Say if I wanted to work in the school system—that would be probably an issue. I have friends who are teachers that aren’t out because they are afraid they would lose their job, so working around children and stuff, how will people feel about that. Me being a gay male may influence that, me being a black, gay male (Appendix I).

Once again, this statement speaks to class as Martavius may have spent more time around different races and ethnicities among the people he works around, perhaps at the university and MGLCC as a middle class individual. Martavius’ statement also shows how his multiple identities might interact, mentioning that he might not know exactly where discrimination is coming from or if it is actually occurring, as it may be “behind the doors.” Because his sexual identity may be visible, according to Martavius, he feels that he is sometimes discriminated against on that end. However, his blackness is also fully visible. While he says that being black plays less of a role, he also says that he would not want to become a teacher for fear of losing his job, and that his being both black and gay influence that. Both AJ and Martavius seem to point to one aspect of their identity as the culprit of discrimination, which has to do with the way people
with multiple minority identities view themselves as well as what society deems their most master status, even though all of their identities work together.

These are only a few examples of the ways multiple minority identities interact in the lives of black Memphis LGBTs. According to several interviewees, because of the challenges that black gay people face, many choose not to “come out,” while others, because they do not identify as gay, feel that there is nothing to “come out” to. According to Benoit Denizet-Lewis who writes on the “Down Low” culture among the African American male community of Atlanta, black gay men often remain secretive of their sexuality, operating within a black culture that “deems masculinity and fatherhood as a black man’s primary responsibility—and homosexuality as a white man’s perversion.” Below, Eddie attests to the perceived risks involved in coming out as black and gay:

To me…a majority of the community (black) is going to be closeted because, maybe you know, sequestered from the rest of their family, their job, church, and they really treasure those things to where they don’t want to put themselves in danger, at risk of not totally coming out or not dealing with their sexuality. And that brings up anger, that brings up promiscuity, and other things like that, and I have plenty of friends that won’t say like, ‘Oh, I’m out,’ and they are on the Down Low or whatever, and they do think that white men have more of a privilege, but to me, you have the same opportunity because you don’t know their struggle…(Appendix O).

While Eddie shows that many black men remain discreet about their homosexuality because of the things they cherish, such as family and their church life, he also feels, along with the other black LGBT men, that there is still a place for black gay men within African American culture.
According to Eddie, “A lot of my friends that are white got kicked out of their house or they were banned from their church or, you know, their families disowned them, just like the black community” (Appendix O). And according to AJ, “I can’t say that I’ve personally experienced any discrimination from the black community” (Appendix H). These statements go against the common notion of homophobia in the African American community. Too often, the African American community is blamed for harboring greater homophobia when this has more to do with LGBT issues playing out differently in black and white communities.

4. The African American Church’s Role in Black LGBT Memphis Life

This section focuses on the role of the African American church in the lives of black LGBTs, especially in Memphis, with its influential role in the community and history within the Civil Rights Movement. Jermaine discusses the strength of religion within his community, with its power to lift up as well as bring down. While this narrative transcends region in some ways, Jermaine’s perspective seems to have a particular resonance in the South. Jermaine feels that religion is one of the strongest factors as to why black LGBT people might choose not to “come out.”

The black gay community is very secretive of their sexuality, homosexuality specifically. For one thing, we as black people are very religious; we are very strong in our own religious upbringing. I’m not going to discredit other races’ religious upbringings…We as a black people, our church and religion has always played a strong figure as far as black upbringing is concerned, because from the beginning of slavery, the church, the black friendly church was where we organized in order to establish unity and organize, and that moved down towards
the civil rights era where we basically had leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and other ministers were not only ministers but political figures for the black community, as well. So you take that and bring that forth to this very day, that in itself shows that our mentality has been based on religion, or the religion we have been brought forth to believe on…(Appendix B).

In “Quare Studies,” E. Patrick Johnson highlights the sometimes contradictory role of the black church: “just as the black church has been a political and social force in the struggle for the racial freedom for many of its constituents, it has also, to a large extent, occluded sexual freedom for many of its practitioners, namely gays and lesbians” (“Quare Studies” 144). Johnson also shows how black churches may exploit the talents of their gay and lesbian members, those that are deacons, youth directors, or in the choir, while at the same time, explicitly condemning homosexuality. Even though pastors may preach against homosexuality at the pulpit, some are also known to have sexual relations with male members (Black Gay Men 183). Several of those interviewed show that there is still a lot of silence surrounding homosexuality in the black church. For instance, Jermaine says that black churches might want LGBTs there, but “don’t want to know who you are” (Appendix B). Though Eddie attends New Direction, a welcoming, predominantly black church in Memphis, he also says that LGBT issues are generally kept under the radar at his church as well as other black churches:

The thing about black churches is that they are more hesitant on dealing with the issues of the LGBTQ Community [sic]. If there is an issue that is brought up, then they'll be likely to mask the issue and generalize it so it won't look a way that's controversial. (I.e. HIV/AIDS among the Gay African American Male Community
could be talked about as a whole African American issue instead of targeting the Gay African American Males) [sic]. (Wiley).

Eddie gives the example of the church avoiding issues considered controversial by discussing HIV/AIDS as a disease that affects the African American community as a whole, with no mention of its influence on black gay individuals. Again, the church is contradictory as they may welcome LGBTs, but refuse to acknowledge their experiences, or might not have the know-how to acknowledge their experiences without being stigmatizing.

In Memphis, the black church has a strong influence and has affected all the black LGBTs interviewed in some way. Jermaine further demonstrates some of the contradictions in black LGBT religious life, as well as the role that place plays in that.

Memphis is actually home to one of the major Pentecostal religions—Church of God in Christ, so that church in specific is highly popular among the black community…so that in itself kind of conflicts with being gay here in Memphis, because you’ve got this major thing here going against being gay, but at the same time, you have so many black gay people attracted to that type of church environment… (Appendix B).

Jermaine shows the strength of Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C.) among black LGBTs in Memphis, a church that stands firmly against homosexuality (“National Organization for Marriage”). While some black LGBTs, like Eddie, do find open churches, others are able to disassociate with the homophobia black churches may harbor (Johnson, Black Gay Men 183). However, most of the black LGBTs no longer attend church in Memphis because of negative experiences or a loss of interest. Along with Eddie, most of the white LGBTs left their conservative religious backgrounds and found welcoming churches. It seems that white LGBTs
had easier times finding a new church home. According to Johnson, black individuals critique of national LGBT friendly churches like Metropolitan Community Churches include that “the music isn’t as good” or “the service isn’t ‘black’ enough” (184). In general, because the black church tradition is so ingrained in African American culture, people are often in search of the culturally black experience of worship, even if they fundamentally disagree with messages of patriarchy and heterosexism that might be part of the church.

In Memphis, LGBT welcoming churches remain predominantly white, leaving black LGBTs with fewer options when searching for a faith community within their culture. It is important to note that though the majority of this small sample of black LGBTs no longer attend church, the black church “remains for some gays and lesbians a sustaining site of spiritual affirmation, comfort, and an artistic outlet” (149). Though there are ample examples of homophobia within the black church, the African American church cannot simply be viewed as a force against homosexuality. Instead, it plays a more complicated, contradictory role in the lives of black LGBTs.

5. Race First?: Black Queer Identity and its Political Implications

An article by Marcus Anthony Hunter called “All the Gays are White and all the Blacks are Straight: Black Gay Men, Identity, and Community” observes the various ways that black gay men conceptualize their identities. The article was written in the context of the debate surrounding Proposition 8 and the suggestion that, along with right wing conservatives, the black vote was responsible for passing the measure in 2008. Hunter suggests that the vote could have also included black LGBT individuals, as questions as to whether black LGBTs considered the issue important politically went unexplored in the discourse surrounding Prop 8 (81). By
observing how black gay men position their race and sexuality in terms of their identity, Hunter shows that “there is no singular black gay man,” suggesting that this has important political implications (90). For instance, a black gay person who identifies as black before gay may not consider LGBT issues important. Or, a black gay person may consider quality of life issues such as anti-discrimination more important than issues like marriage. According to Hunter, LGBT rights activists may need to rethink the use of civil rights rhetoric in appealing to the African American community, an issue that carries much weight in Memphis, as I address in the following chapter (90). Though the identity formations of Eddie, Martavius, AJ and Jermaine expressed do not privilege one identity—black or gay—over the other, they have different ways of conceptualizing and performing those identities:

**Eddie**: I don’t do one more than the other (black or gay) because, like, I always say at the end of the day I’m just Eddie. So, it’s like, not a lot of label I’ve placed on myself, so a lot of my other friends will always say, ‘Oh, so you know you’re black first and you do this,’ or ‘You’re gay first and you do this,’ but I’m like, ‘No, I’m just Eddie.’ So I don’t identify more with one more than the other because at any time, if one happens to come up more, still going to represent for both because I’m still both. I can’t turn off one and then turn on the other, but I know a lot of people that are like, ‘I’m a black gay male,’ ‘I’m a gay black man.’ I’m like, ‘It doesn’t matter which you put first, you’re still going to be both’ [laughs] (Appendix O).

Eddie identifies with both aspects of his minority identity equally. However, he shows that people have certain expectations of him as a black man as well as a gay man, and that those
two aspects of his identity are often perceived as unrelated. This shows the limitations placed upon black gay people who are often expected to act one way as gay and one way as black.

**Martavius:** Well, with me, you have to know who I am first. I’m very open to everything. I love everyone, *[laughs]*, I really do…Some people feel that—I used to be called ‘Oreo’ or ‘white’ because of the way I spoke, or the way I dress, or the type of music I listen to. I like S Club 7 (teen pop band) and stuff like that, and it’s just that I feel more closer to the LGBTQ community because you have variety in that, black, atheist or whatever, but I do have a strong relationship with my African American community, there are just issues there at times (Appendix I).

Here, Martavius seems more connected to the LGBT community, but he also told me that he identifies equally as gay and black. As he shows, he has a strong relationship with the African American community though there are “issues there at times.” Martavius, too, did not meet people’s expectations of a black man because of his speech, dress, and the type of music he listened to as a gay man, earning him the name “Oreo.” This shows that black and gay is often separated in societal discourse, though black LGBTs do not necessarily separate the two in terms of their identity.

AJ gives a very queer expression of her identity, rejecting categories and labels: “I am who I am. I’m mixed, so I don’t, I’m just AJ. Titles are over rated. Why can’t we be who we are regardless of race, gender, sexuality, etcetera? That’s limiting” (Flores). Like many LGBTs interviewed, AJ rejects the categories placed upon by her by heteronormative society that she considers to limit her ability to simply “be who she is.” This and other statements show that there
seems to be a dichotomy between the way people imagine themselves to be and the way society does, which places label upon them.

Though some black LGBTs, because their blackness is visible while their sexuality is not, consider being black paramount, Jermaine does not privilege one aspect of his identity over the other. Instead, he simply states that there is a difference, but that both identities make him “who he is”: “I consider them both aspects of me (black and gay). I don’t identify with one more so than the other. I think the only thing about it is that you are able to see one, and you might not be able to see the other unless you just truly got to know me, but I don’t put one over the other. I think they are just both part of what makes me me” (Appendix B).

These examples show the multiple ways black LGBTs conceptualize their identities, though none consider one to take precedence over the other. Supporting Johnson’s argument for multiple definitions of blackness, they show that sometimes, “black is and black ain’t” (144). A more nuanced understanding of the range of black and gay identity contributes to a better understanding of how LGBT issues operate differently in different communities. As I demonstrate in the next chapter, place has a significant influence on black LGBT issues in Memphis, as the city’s civil rights legacy shapes discourse surrounding the local movement for LGBT rights.

6. Conclusion

Black gay prides symbolizes racial division and the ways black LGBTs experience the world differently than whites. A separate black gay pride parade provides an opportunity for visibility among the black gay community of Memphis, one often rendered invisible. A “politics of respectability” shapes the ways middle class black LGBTs perceive Memphis Black Gay
Pride, which emphasizes sex as an important political statement. Differences between black and white LGBT experiences involve the social and economic realities of sexual minorities and people of color in the South, who may experience discrimination on several different levels as intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class interact. Because of the added risks, real or perceived, involved in coming out as gay in the African American community, many black gay people choose to keep their sexuality discreet. This has more to do with life in a racialized society than greater homophobia in the black community. Moreover, the black church cannot be viewed simply as a force of homophobia, but has a more complicated, often contradictory role in the lives of black LGBTs. Certain expectations of people as black and/or gay mask the possibilities of blackness and render black LGBTs invisible. A greater understanding of the ways black gays and lesbians perform and conceptualize their identities and respond to political issues may be needed to come up with more effective strategies within local LGBT movements.
IV. THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL CHANGE: CHURCH INVOLVEMENT IN THE MEMPHIS LGBT MOVEMENT

And as Memphis is, the Methodist church on this block may be delighted to have you and open and everything, and the Methodist church ten blocks away, it’s anathema. You know, we have Prescott Memorial that’s very open and welcoming and there are some other, there may be some other Baptist congregations that are “live and let live,” but in general, you know, the high profile ones are definitely not, although the choirs and organ lofts are crawling with queers, as is usually the case (Appendix C).

1. Introduction

Vincent Astor demonstrates another paradoxical aspect of Memphis, the religious atmosphere and combination of progressive and conservative churches where one Open and Affirming (ONA) church that welcomes LGBTs may be located down the street from a condemning megachurch. This can make it difficult for LGBT Memphians to find a church home, though several churches in Memphis have begun to open their doors. Churches like First Congregational United Church of Christ, Holy Trinity Community Church, Prescott Memorial Baptist, and St. Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral have become staples in the LGBT community of Memphis, and several of those are involved in LGBT activism within the church and Memphis at large. This chapter observes the local manifestation of a national phenomenon of religious LGBT activism and church involvement within the Memphis movement. I observe religious opposition in Memphis and the challenges LGBT activists face, the role of the African American church and
Memphis’ history of civil rights within the movement, the ways that secular and religious communities have collaborated on the issue of LGBT rights, and the role of local churches in creating social change.

2. Challenges to the Local Memphis Movement

On a national scale, LGBT activists incorporate a range of strategies that emphasize visibility, diversity, community building, education, and working at the local level with public officials and through the courts to secure laws against hate crimes and discrimination, as well as public policy benefiting LGBTs in the way of employment, adoption, and healthcare. Other tactics involve working with faith communities to promote LGBT rights. Several publications by the Gay and Lesbian Task Force (the Task Force) and Human Rights Campaign (HRC) encourage the collaboration of progressive religious organizations and LGBT activists in combating religious opposition to LGBT rights. The Task Force’s *A Time to Build Up*, outlines steps in religious-secular coalition building suggested in response to California’s Proposition 8 campaign, and *David v. Goliath* shows the importance of such strategizing in the face of strong religious opposition (Voelkel, Lindsay and Stern). The HRC’s Religion and Faith Program “seeks to engage all faith traditions in a deeper dialogue on questions of fairness and equality for LGBT Americans” and works to build a diverse faith-based movement (“Religion & Faith”). These types of LGBT religious groups are growing in response to the Christian right, which uses scare tactics and “slippery slope” rhetoric to pit LGBTs against Christians. This section demonstrates how progressive religious and LGBT groups have come together to send a Christian message of equality in combating such religious opposition in Memphis.
Religious conservatism poses a major challenge to the Memphis LGBT movement. A recent Pew poll ranked the religiosity of the fifty states according to four measures: the importance of religion in people's lives, frequency of attendance at worship services, frequency of prayer, and absolute certainty of belief in God. Tennessee ranks fifth, sixth, sixth, and fourth respectively ("How Religious"). Tennessee has a strong evangelical presence, which makes opposition to marriage equality and LGBT rights in general more likely. Indeed, 81% of Tennesseans voted to amend the state constitution to define marriage as between one man and one woman in 2004 (Thistlewhaite and Cook 2). In Memphis, this religious conservatism was exemplified by dialogue surrounding a city ordinance that would prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity or expression in the workplace (Connolly).

Starting in 2008, the TEP made two attempts to pass the ordinance, which inspired heated debate. During the discussion surrounding the potential adoption, several city commissioners cited religious beliefs for opposing an ordinance, and many church leaders became involved as well. Commissioner Sidney Chism, who did not vote, said he was “a little bit torn about whether to support this ordinance because I'm an old traditional Baptist. ... I'm not for or against this ordinance, but I'm against discrimination” (Connolly). The most vocal in his sentiments against a city ordinance was Republican commissioner Wyatt Bunker, who said that the proposed measure could be called one to protect “the seven deadly sins with a touch of filth” (Connolly). The fact that personal beliefs were cited so often at the commissioner’s meeting reveals a disregard for the separation of church and state that often characterizes the South’s conservative politics, especially at the local level.

Religious opposition to LGBT rights in Memphis includes many evangelical groups and churches including the Southern Baptist Convention, Bellevue Baptist and World Overcomers of
Memphis, the American Family Association based in Tupelo, Mississippi, and the Family Action Council of Tennessee (FACT) who pour money into anti-gay campaigns (Appendix C, Appendix E, Appendix K). For example, in 2006, FACT raised $210,393 during the anti-gay marriage amendment campaign, which was more than any other committee in the race (Thistlehwaite and Cook 22). Indeed, anti-LGBT religious groups have combined incomes that significantly outweigh those of LGBT organizations (Hyde 120). Moreover, opposition to the LGBT movement is much more diverse than its body of supporters, as various religious institutions that would otherwise be in disagreement unite on their stance against LGBT rights (Campbell 6).

According to the Dean of St. Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral of Memphis, if any church can be said to be heading the anti-gay movement in Memphis, it is the evangelical megachurch of Bellevue Baptist (Appendix A). Bellevue is a predominantly white church where FACT held a “Stand for the Family” rally against a non-discrimination ordinance. Pastor Steve Gaines spoke out against a city ordinance at city council hearings, charging that if the measure passed, churches and businesses would be “victimized” by not being able to make “moral” hiring decision if they could not discriminate against gays and lesbians (Thistlehwaite and Cook 22). Another megachurch in Memphis, the predominantly black World Overcomers Church ran full page advertisements in Memphis’ Commercial Appeal condemning homosexuality (the preacher there, Alton R. Williams, also called Hurricane Katrina “retribution for New Orleans’ embrace of sin”) (Dewan). Of course, such fringe activity exists despite increasingly positive attitudes towards LGBTs. The irony is that these churches do not take a Christian approach to LGBT rights. As Astor posits, another paradox of such megachurches is that they are “crawling with queers” (Appendix C).
Several LGBT activists in Memphis mention the need for greater outreach to the African American church, which is perceived to pose some challenges to the local LGBT movement (Appendix C, Appendix E, Appendix K). African American church leaders often feel that their communities have more urgent problems to deal with, such as racial and economic injustice (Thistlewaite and Cook 14). Furthermore, some black church leaders hold that LGBT rights and black civil rights are not the same and should not be compared. This sentiment came through at the Shelby County Commission when several black members of the city council expressed concern that LGBT rights and civil rights were being equated during discussion regarding a city ordinance protecting gender identity and expression. According to Addie Hollaway who spoke at the meeting, “We didn’t choose to be black…but when you have a sexual preference, that’s something that you choose” (Connolly). Such sentiment not only ignores the fact that many LGBTs do not feel like their sexuality was chosen, but also that there are black LGBTs who may want such protections in place.

Because tension arises when LGBT activists attempt to appeal to the African American community by using civil rights rhetoric, especially in a city with a strong history of racial struggle, Memphis LGBT activists often avoid comparing the two movements. Michelle Bliss, vice chair of the TEP, says that she would rather compare the LGBT movement to women’s struggle for rights:

Even though there are some parallels to be drawn between the LGBT fight for rights and the civil rights movement, it’s a very touchy thing to talk about. Personally, I prefer to compare it to the suffragette movement. It’s really about gender bias. It’s really about the idea that if you don’t fit the stereotypical mode of what your gender is supposed to be, that you’re somehow less valuable to
society…It is more touchy in Memphis because of the legacy of the death of Martin Luther King. It’s unfortunate, but I think we do walk a fine line in Memphis sometimes about the words that we choose and the way we describe the movement (Appendix E).

Memphis LGBT Attorney at Law Susan Mackenzie also mentions the tension that might arise with using civil rights rhetoric in Memphis and perceives black church opposition as a barrier. Mackenzie holds that, for the most part, the city’s civil rights legacy has been an example for the LGBT movement:

I think, overall, the Civil Rights Movement has been a model, has been an inspiration for the gay and lesbian civil rights movement. I think there are definitely some significant leaders in the African American community—Coretta Scott King who from day one has supported LGBT rights, two local leadership—Ben Hooks and his wife, Russell Sugarmon, Minerva Johnican…who’ve always been supportive of gay rights and women’s rights and didn’t hide away from it. You’ve got the other side, the churches, who just keep the same, ‘it’s a sin,’ and blatant, and often in the church talking about the sin of homosexuality. And so I think you get a lot of that. I think there’s another group that resents gays and lesbians comparing their fight to the African American fight for civil rights. I think they see a real distinction in, ‘OK, you can pass until you tell someone you’re gay, they don’t know, but the minute I step out of my front door they know I’m black.’ And so I think there’s a feeling that takes away from them when you compare the two movements (Appendix K).
Mackenzie shows that while there are several leaders in the African American community who support LGBT rights, there remains religious opposition from a few African American churches, and the loudness of those preachers seem to obscure the work that other African American leaders are doing to promote LGBT rights in Memphis. There also seems to be a strong feeling that LGBT rights and civil rights should not be compared by both activists and a number of African Americans. However, what all social movements are about is bringing marginalized people to the center. Civil rights and LGBT rights may be viewed separately, but they are both part of a broader struggle for equality and human rights.

African American religious leaders may find LGBT quality of life issues such as anti-hate crimes and discrimination more important than ones such as marriage, and work with LGBT activists on those issues (Thistlethwaite and Cook 14). That many African Americans churches do not immediately embrace LGBT rights cannot simply be attributed to homophobia. Former Reverend Cheryl Cornish of First Congregational offers her perspective on why this is:

I just think these issues are complicated church to church. You know, sexuality in the black community has just a whole different history, a whole different legacy… I feel the need to go very gently in terms of pointing fingers at the black church about these issues. I think these issues live differently in their communities and in their history. We’ve had dialogue in particular with one African American church on this topic and I think there’s an opening there, but maybe not the ability, there at least among that church, to make a dive in and say, ‘Oh, we’re Open and Affirming’ or ‘We’re Greater Light’ or ‘We’re welcoming to gay people…’ (Appendix F).
African American churches address a variety of different concerns within their communities that might also encompass issues that affect black LGBTs in the way of racial injustice. At the time, issues specific to LGBTs, and whites exclusively, may not be as pressing on black church’s agendas for this reason. An antidiscrimination ordinance for LGBT people may not do anything to address routine racial discrimination and microagression, despite antidiscrimination policies, against blacks. As Cornish contends, LGBT issues do not carry the same meaning within black and white church communities. This shows how the role of place, with Memphis’ conservatism, religiosity, and history of racial struggle, has shaped conceptions and created challenges specific to the local LGBT movement.

3. Memphis’ LGBT Movement and Religious Activism

Instead of dismissing religious activism because of strong opposition to LGBT rights coming from some churches in Memphis, many local activists see the importance of collaboration with progressive religious organizations in spreading a Christian message of equality. Here, I focus on the work of the Tennessee Equality Project (TEP) and the Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center (MGLCC) along with First Congregational United Church of Christ in Memphis.

First Congregational began after the Union army took over Memphis during the Civil War. The chaplain of the Union army was a Congregationalist, and he founded “Stranger’s Church” for the Union army soldiers. Stranger’s Church evolved into First Congregational, which maintains a sort of outsider status, especially in light of the church’s progressiveness. First Congregational’s denomination, United Church of Christ (UCC), was the first to ordain an openly gay man, Rev. William R. Johnson in 1972, and First Congregational gained its official
Open and Affirming (ONA) title in 1991, becoming the sixtieth church in the UCC to do so (“William R. Johnson,” Appendix F). The ONA distinction grew out of the needs of the congregation, which at that time, was very small and made up of mainly women who wanted a female priest. Two lesbian couples were members, one of which was asked to leave the Presbyterian church that they previously attended. The question of conducting a service of union arose during that time, and the pastor, Reverend Cheryl Cornish, engaged the congregation (which maintains autonomy over itself) in an open discussion that resulted in the adoption of the church’s ONA title. The 1990s also marked the national AIDS crisis, which led First Congregational to dealing more with the gay community (Appendix F).

First Congregational addresses many concerns of the community besides LGBT related issues, including hunger, poverty, and sustainability (Appendix F). Dubbed “First Congo” by its beloved members, the church provides space for the Mid-South Peace and Justice Center, Memphis Area Gay Youth (MAGY) and Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) (Thistlewhite and Cook 8). The partnership of First Congregational with secular groups on the issue of LGBT activism and awareness demonstrates how coalition building between progressive churches and LGBT organizations manifests locally in Memphis. The church’s involvement in the local movement has included promoting a non-discrimination ordinance, increasing the visibility of Memphis LGBTQs, and combating violence against the transgender community.

In 2008, when the Shelby County branch of the TEP first introduced the non-discrimination ordinance that would ban discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity or expression in city employment, First Congo offered its front steps for what turned out to be one of the largest LGBT rallies held in Memphis. Also in attendance were straight
members of the church, and both Rev. Cornish and Associate Pastor Sonia Louden Walker spoke at the event. LGBT participants were encouraged to “call in gay” to the city council to press council members to support their rights as Memphis residents (Appendix F). The example is just one of the many ways that First Congo has offered constituency and space in the local movement.

In 2009, the MGLCC created a billboard education campaign to increase the visibility of local LGBTs, showing that they are neighbors, friends, family members, pastors, and soldiers. One in particular displayed “Ministers in support of equality for gay, lesbian, and transgender people,” and featured several local ministers including Rev. Cornish and Rev. Walker (Thistlethwaite and Cook 19). When one of those billboards displaying a Memphis marine that read “I’m gay and I protected your freedom” was defaced, First Congregational hosted a rally at which several Memphians who appeared on the billboards spoke in 2009 (Bradley). The MGLCC and First Congo also work together to increase awareness and oppose violence directed towards the transgender community. Several vigils were held at the church in response to a string of hate crimes in Memphis, including the murder of African American transgender woman Duanna Johnson in 2008 (Moore).

First Congo has been actively involved in the LGBT community and local activism since the early nineties, but other ONA churches such as Holy Trinity Community Church, which formed out of the religious needs of the Memphis LGBT community, have also been strongly involved. Holy Trinity, with a mixed congregation in regards to race and ethnicity as well as sexual orientation, houses Memphis’ Pride offices and maintains a strong partnership with the MGLCC. The church also helped start two ONA churches in Nashville and Jackson, cities where those congregations were needed (Appendix G). Other progressive churches include Prescott
Memorial Baptist, which was booted out of the Shelby Baptist Association for hiring a female preacher in 1987. The church then left the Southern Baptist Convention and Tennessee Baptist Convention, later obtaining membership with the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists (Ledbetter). During the city ordinance debate, the Dean of St. Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral of Memphis expressed his full support: “I wonder what's next. Is it going to be to discriminate against people with big ears? Is it going to be to discriminate against people with big noses?” (Maki). Other outspoken religious leaders include rabbis from Reform Jewish groups, including Rabbi Micah Greenstein of The Temple Israel, who has spoken at press conferences and events advocating LGBT rights (Thistlethwaite and Cook). First Baptist Church of Memphis, a welcoming church whose motto is “A different way to be Baptist,” emphasizes on its website that “all Baptist churches are different” and expresses regret that often “all Baptist are ‘painted with the same brush,’” stressing its openness towards all people (First Baptist). Unitarian churches including First Unitarian Church of the River and Shelby Unitarian in Memphis are also welcoming. The list presented here is not exhaustive, as several churches in Memphis are beginning to incorporate the experiences of LGBTs.

Church activism helps to bridge a gap between the African American community and LGBT issues, as black churches and LGBT activists come together on HIV/AIDS awareness and education. Several African American churches in Memphis work to combat HIV/AIDS in their community, including St. Andrew’s A.M.E. church in Memphis, which sponsored a public awareness campaign that featured nine educational billboards on HIV/AIDS (Thistlewaite and Cook 19-20) and Christ Missionary Baptist Church, which hosted a World AIDS Day Service in 2011 (Batts). First Congregational and Holy Trinity work specifically to break down racial barriers in their churches. First Congregational is recognized as a multi-cultural church, which
requires at least a fifteen percent non-white church population. Very few churches in America are multi-cultural, especially in the South where churches remain highly segregated, so gaining that distinction is quite rare (Appendix F).

Memphis LGBT activists see the value in working with faith communities to create a broad-based, diverse movement, getting people involved across racial and ethnic lines. This is especially important in a majority black city with an increasing Latino population, and in a city that remains, like other areas of the South, racially segregated in several respects. Much of the work that breaks down barriers along the lines of race and ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality begins in the church, eventually influencing the community at large. With strong opposition coming from religiously conservative groups in Memphis, progressive churches play an important role in combating negativity and providing support for the local LGBT community.

4. The Significance of Church Involvement in the Memphis Movement

Though most churches do not “scream it loudly” that they are ONA or welcoming to LGBTs—they might not be flying rainbow flags or “on the front lines” of the movement—the messages they send are equally important (Appendix F). In this section, we hear from three Memphis pastors; Andy Andrews of St. Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral, Cheryl Cornish, former pastor of First Congregational United Church of Christ, and Paul Ecknes-Tucker of Holy Trinity Community Church. The preachers discuss the church’s responsibility within the local LGBT movement, what that work means to members, and how its ideals influence not just the faith community, but the community at large.

On the role of his church in the local movement of Memphis, Dean Andy Andrews of St. Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral, a progressive church in Memphis, says,
The metaphor that I’m going to use is probably the same that Dr. King used, that the church is being the tail lights, not the head lights, but the church is on the car and has moved forward with this vehicle for equal rights… I would say that part of the church is the engine that’s stirring up behind the scenes. But it’s the LGBT community here that’s out and making it happen. I’m proud of, and aspire to be and move this congregation in that direction, too. We just do it slow, more slow, but it gets there. It’s not radical. It’s not active, but it’s better than the real homophobic congregations and that I know are filled with gay men and women and all kinds of issues. I pray for healing for everything (Appendix A).

St. Mary’s Episcopal is a church that works quietly “behind the scenes,” affirming their LGBT members, creating outlets for them in the church, and raising the conscious of straight members. Like St. Mary’s, churches might have Bible studies on sexuality that show the different interpretations of homosexuality or sponsor anti-defamation workshops that teach youth leaders how to properly nurture teens who come out to them (Appendix A). They might, like First Congo, celebrate same-sex adoptions among their members by framing a new family’s picture in the church (Appendix K). All are ways churches incorporate the experiences of queer individuals, providing an open space that allows for increased visibility of LGBTs and non-traditional families. Though most pastors agree that their church’s role is not to lead the LGBT movement, most feel that they have a responsibility to meet members’ needs. Former pastor of First Congregational, Rev. Cheryl Cornish, contends that most of the work churches do is not directly tied to LGBT rights, but is largely symbolic:

In churches, part of what all these fights about ordination, whether it’s ordination of women, ordination of gay people, you know, a lot of times the fight over gay
rights takes place over ordination, and part of what is happening in a church is you’re sort of modeling, ‘What does a perfect human being look like?’ you know, not saying any of us is perfect, but, ’What does a whole human being, what are we supposed to be?’ Those are the kinds of questions that really live in your religious life, your spiritual life. And so part of that, part of the issue of the inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender folks in a religious community is really modeling that to be gay is not just a person who sins, but we accept them anyway, that it can be an affirmative human way to be. It can be the way God wants us to be. And so that’s often the crux of these fights, is who embodies a whole human being…That’s why these issues in churches become important.

They are very symbolic (Appendix F).

As Rev. Cornish posits, ONA churches do more than send the message, “It’s OK to be gay.” Instead, they affirm LGBTs as “whole” human beings. Though First Congregational has been dubbed the “gay church,” it maintains a mixed congregation, encouraging difference and diversity. That most ONA churches are also racially and ethnically mixed shows that LGBT rights issues are in line with broader goals of peace and social justice in the way of economic, racial, and environmental justice and anti-war goals. Moreover, LGBTs become part of a larger religious community when they join welcoming churches, one in which queer and straight members maintain weekly contact and close ties. Rev. Cornish discusses what the church’s ONA title means to straight members and how attitudes have changed within First Congo during her time as pastor:

Certainly within the church I think for us it’s been a wonderful experience to name that welcome and to live into it, and at times it’s been a little hard to be
against the grain of the wider Memphis community, but what our church members have found is that folks who are initially nervous thinking, ‘Oh we don’t want this label of being a gay church,’ have realized the importance of a church defining itself as welcoming strangers, and friendships have formed, and loyalties have formed. You know, what happens is heterosexual people start owning or feeling the bigotry because it’s their friends that are being talked about, or their church that is being talked about, and so I think that solidarity has been a very good and important thing (Appendix F).

The relationships between LGBT and straight members that develop within mixed churches help get straight members involved in awareness in the community.

Another part of the consciousness raising that takes place in churches involves the children in attendance, especially those of non-traditional families. Churches have a responsibility to bring their young members up in a supportive and nurturing environment and to teach them what it means to be a “whole person.” One way that churches care for their children, Rev. Cornish posits, involves images that are created within the church:

Mary Daily, a famous feminist theologian, made the statement, ‘When God is male, males are Gods,’ and that also plays for sexuality. If only a heterosexual person is able to be seen as a Godly person, or a righteous person, or living the life God created them to live, then gay people are always going to be a little bit defective, a little bit off to the side, not fully human. So those understandings of what a good human being, [laughs] or whole human being, however you want to look at that, is about, those are important symbols. And for children growing up, for example, if they have same sex parents, to see their family as not abnormal,
maybe not majority, but not abnormal, really starts changing the consciousness of the kids, and that all starts playing into the legal structures, ‘Who can have custody of children?, Whose families are OK?, Who can parent?, Who has rights?, Who has spousal rights?,’ that kind of stuff. It starts bleeding into all those kinds of legal covenants and, you know, then into the political realm. So that’s kind of the main work I think that we do in churches that is kind of our unique work, you know, is that symbolic work (Appendix F).

Things that seem like individual church issues or exclusively theological actually have broader social and political implications. Though church discussion over obtaining an ONA title, offering same-sex commitment ceremonies, or beginning to ordain LGBT ministers largely stays within church walls, it begins dialogue that is equally significant in affecting change within the wider community. Again, Cornish demonstrates how changes in people’s consciousness often start in the church and then begin to influence political structures:

…you really can’t change the political world until you start also changing the symbolic world. So it really does change your sense of who has authority, who has power, who has righteousness, who has voice. That’s where I feel the church contribution is especially significant. It starts changing people’s consciousness on who matters, who’s human, who can embody God, you know, who’s Godly, so that’s probably the issue, you know, ‘what kinds of families are acceptable?’, you know, ‘can two fathers raise a family and can that be a righteous, Godly home?’, ‘is that a home like it ought to be?’ Church models what it ought to be. And so if you have not changed that in peoples’ thinking, it’s going to be very hard to make
some of these other changes, and so that’s a big part of what we are doing in a
church (Appendix F).

Likewise, Rev. Ecknes-Tucker of Holy Trinity suggests that churches start changing attitudes at
a very basic level by alleviating fears of difference and creating awareness that goes beyond the
church:

The more that people become aware that gay people are not odd they’re just
different, they’re not evil they’re just different, they’re not sinful they’re just
different, that’s a whole growing awareness for our culture. So, the fact that this
congregation exists and has a sign on a busy street and works with other
organizations and is in the newspaper occasionally, on TV occasionally, I think
that helps to just kind of get that consciousness that is a precursor for any change
or awareness in the community (Appendix G).

Unfortunately, the inclusion of LGBTs within the church and its ranks remains a divisive
issue for denominations such as Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian, which remain split over the
issue in Memphis (“Policies of 47 Christian Faith Groups”). For others who are ONA, like Holy
Trinity and First Congo, the discussion is getting old:

Ecknes-Tucker: It’s really kind of like, ‘Oh, please’ [laughs]. Especially, it’s so
funny to put it into historical perspective, because you hear the exact same
arguments being used that were used for women being included in ordination, for
black people being included in society—it’s the exact same thing. ‘This isn’t how
God expects,’ or ‘This isn’t the way church is done.’ And it’s like, when do wake
up and say we’re just perpetuating the same kinds of things with just a different
group? So, what we don’t learn we’re destined to repeat in history (Appendix G).
Worn out arguments that circulated during past social movements continue to inhibit progress today, as Rev. Ecknes-Tucker demonstrates. Rev. Cornish also feels that the discussion surrounding churches and LGBT inclusion, which First Congo is well passed, has been thoroughly exhausted:

By this stage of the game, we’ve been doing same sex union services, and so we’re kind of at the point with new staff, we don’t even ask whether they’re gay or straight. It’s just kind of a, you know, we are twenty years into this now, so when other churches are discussing whether they should do it or not it’s kind of like ‘Wow.’ I’m just sorry it continues to be such a discussion point. It just feels real old (Appendix F).

Though all the pastors said that the Memphis church community has progressed to some degree overall, that progression has been slow. Young people play an especially vital role in the movement’s progression, having come of age in a social climate of increasing positive attitudes towards LGBTs. But, as Rev. Cornish shared with me, there’s a common feeling among younger generations that do not want to go to church because of the bigotry they perceive to be coming from religious institutions. According to Rev. Cornish, faith communities must move forward on these issues if they want to make religion relevant to a new generation.

I think younger people are absolutely sick of our discussion of the issue. I think it just seems like an old, passé issue and, you know, finally if churches are going to grow they just have got to move on on this...And, you know, churches, if not for their own sense of morality or theology or faith or whatever, I think just in terms of being viable for a whole new generation of people who just have not grown up
with this stuff around them, they’re going to have to open their doors just to be viable in the next decades (Appendix F).

That the discussion has entered the public consciousness of faith communities and is now considered passé for some offers hope for the future of the LGBT movement. A decade ago, few would have predicted that the majority of Americans would now be in favor of same-sex marriage (Somashekhar and Craighill). It was only twenty years ago that First Congregational was receiving hate calls and bomb threats (Appendix F). Though church progression on the issues of LGBT equality has been slow, it has also been persistent. In Memphis, the work that faith communities do to advance LGBT rights plays a major role, not only within individual churches, but in the community at large.

This chapter observes the importance of place in the LGBT movement, specifically the role that religion plays in the movement of the conservative southern city of Memphis. I show the strength of religion in the local movement, the challenges it poses, as well as the ways religion has been a tool for progress. Memphis’ church movement demonstrates a local manifestation of religious LGBT activism happening at a national level, but takes a particular shape in Memphis. The pairing of faith communities and secular groups that promote equality proves especially vital, and an effective way to raise consciousness and bridge perceived gaps between the LGBT and religious community. In Memphis, with its history of civil rights and racial struggle, racial barriers continue to challenge the movement, though LGBT groups like the MGLCC, the TEP, as well as progressive churches are making strides in not only diversifying the base of their participants, but also their modes of outreach to the community at large, helping create a broad based movement on the ground in the city.
V. CONCLUSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE

Memphis is a paradox. LGBTs find pockets of friendly areas, while, overall, the city can be unwelcoming. Memphis maintains both small town and larger city qualities, complicating a rural/urban divide. One of the city’s greatest paradoxes is that it remains one of the few cities of its size without a city ordinance protecting LGBTs in employment in place, though it is also one of only a few southern cities with a staffed gay and lesbian community center, which serves as a queer friendly space. The Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center (MGLCC) is an important resource for LGBTs in Memphis, many of whom consider the center a haven within a potentially hostile place. Midtown, where the building is located, has been the center for LGBT activism in Memphis, having an atmosphere conducive to the sort of grassroots, progressive movements that might develop in such areas. Midtown, an artistic, racially diverse district serves as a sort of liberal bubble within the city. The MGLCC is one example of a pocket of openness that allows for freedom of gender identity and expression, while in other parts of the city, LGBTs may face different forms of discrimination, negotiating their identities by “butching it up” if male and effeminate or “toning it down” if masculine and female. These are described as routine experiences that help LGBTs get by with less stress in daily life. Transgender individuals face even greater struggles, having ambiguous genders within a society that emphasizes rigid male and female gender roles that do not account for the variability and fluidity of sex, gender, and sexuality. Misunderstanding and fear leads to greater hostility towards transgenders who make up a small, marginalized, secretive community. The death of Duanna Johnson in 2008 in
Memphis brought national attention to the kind of violence transgenders face nationwide. These examples show the significance of place within LGBT communities and the ways they operate.

Throughout this work, I have attempted to show the inseparability of race, religion, and politics in Memphis, which, in many ways, reflects the South as a whole. Tennessee’s conservatism and religiosity shapes the local movement in Memphis, as different strategies to advance LGBT rights are employed in response to certain challenges. Anti-LGBT legislation that not only stifles progress but also attempts to block the advancement of LGBT rights altogether is one characteristic of Tennessee politics that influences LGBT life in Memphis. I show that a range of issues involving employment, adoption, marriage, healthcare, discrimination, and hate crimes are important to LGBT Memphians, who feel that such legislation is necessary in the face of discrimination and negative attitudes. Some of these issues, such as marriage, are rather middle class and conservative, though considered radical by right wing conservatives who oppose LGBT rights because of supposed Christian values. Though there is a lack of legislation benefitting LGBTs in Memphis and the South as a whole, LGBTs do not wish to leave the city, contrary to the “flight out of the South” myth. Instead, they enjoy the city for its various opportunities, diversity, history, culture, size, weather, food, or want to stay and help Memphis become a better place. They often “feel the difference” in social atmosphere in more LGBT friendly places, which brings to light the need for greater legal protections for LGBT individuals in the South.

The Tennessee Equality Project (TEP) is the main organization addressing concerns of LGBT people in the state, facing challenges including religiosity, conservatism, and a lack of education on LGBT issues among the general population. Memphis’s history of racial struggle also influences the local LGBT movement. Though the civil rights movement serves as a model
for LGBT activism in Memphis in some ways, it also creates tension when the two movements are compared. As a result, civil rights and LGBT rights are often treated separately in Memphis, as reflected in the discussion surrounding a city ordinance protecting LGBTs in employment and the testimonies of local activists. Despite challenges, the movement has been progressing since the early 2000s, gaining momentum after a significant decline in activism beginning in the early nineties (Buring). A changing social climate has made it easier for the TEP to be “on the offense” for LGBT rights in Tennessee.

Separate Pride celebrations, Mid-South Pride and Black Gay Pride, are symbols of division within the black and white LGBT communities of Memphis, which mirrors overall racial divisions within the segregated city. Black Gay Pride is an important mode of visibility within a community often rendered non-existent. Middle class black LGBTs may be influenced by a “politics of respectability,” as several disapprove of the overt sexuality evident in Black Gay Pride, but still feel that the celebration can be an empowering experience and beneficial to the black LGBT community. Black Gay Pride is subversive in its disavowal of white queer norms and middle class respectability by making sex public and refusing to separate sex from political issues. Black Gay Pride’s lack of concern with maintaining a “respectable” image as opposed to Mid-South Pride also reflects class disparities among black and white LGBT communities and the Memphis community at large.

Differences in black and white LGBT experience point to the relational nature of race and sexuality and the intersectionality of multiple minority identities. The interviews with black LGBTs allow for multiple definitions of blackness while also exposing how race “defines as well as confines” African Americans, as shown through the limiting expectations placed upon black LGBT Memphians (Johnson, *Quare Studies* 144). The African American church plays a
contradictory role in the lives of black LGBTs as a force of social change within the African American community, but also as an oppressive structure in the lives of black LGBTs at times. Nevertheless, the black church remains an important force in the lives of many gay African Americans. In Memphis, while several black LGBTs no longer attend church, others find welcoming congregations, though there are fewer options within the African American faith community. Black gay Memphians may construct their identities in a variety of ways, though none place one aspect of themselves—black or gay—first. The various ways black gay people construct their identities surely has political implications that may require changes in LGBT rights activists’ strategies. Especially in Memphis, activists may need to avoid comparing civil rights and LGBT rights in attempts to appeal to the African American community. They may also focus on quality of life issues such as anti-discrimination and hate crimes before marriage, though this appears to be happening in the South regardless, as same-sex marriage remains a divisive issue in the region.

The church movement in Memphis has developed in response to religious opposition, a local manifestation of a nationwide strategy. Organized religious opposition from megachurches and evangelical organizations poses some challenges in Memphis, as LGBT rights issues are often considered at odds with Christian values. Progressive churches work to combat negative attitudes and advance LGBT rights, getting queer and straight members involved in spreading a Christian message of equality. While a few black churches participate in the movement, the hesitation of others has more to with the racial environment of Memphis than homophobia, as issues of social and economic justice continue to plague the African American community. Welcoming churches like First Congregational and Holy Trinity work within their churches to alleviate racial division and have become involved in the local church movement by hosting
rallies, working with Pride and the MGLCC, and starting other welcoming churches around the urban South. Other churches have begun opening their doors in Memphis, incorporating the experiences of LGBT people. Such churches help bridge a perceived gap between the LGBT community and community of faith, as many LGBT southerners consider spirituality a vital part of their lives. While progressive churches’ main roles within the LGBT movement are largely symbolic, social change often starts within their walls. The Memphis preachers interviewed show how individual church matters start to influence political structures, encouraging awareness of issues surrounding LGBTs and non-traditional families. Church involvement in Memphis helps to create a broad-based, diverse local movement.

Overall, I hope to have added to scholarship that complicates the idea that LGBT life is somehow stifled in the South, along with notions of the South as backwards and entirely unwelcoming to LGBTs. I also hope to have added to local LGBT movement studies that demonstrate the operation of place and region within the national LGBT movement, showing the intersections of activism and conservatism that define the Memphis movement. While I incorporate a politics of identity, at the same time, I hope to have demonstrated how unstable those constructions are, though significant in providing a unifying force in the collective struggle for LGBT rights. Exhibiting ways that gender, race, class, sexuality, and region interact, I also show that generalizations cannot be made across the experiences and political concerns of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people. I combat notions of homophobia within the black community, revealing aspects of black LGBT life within a racialized society and the ways LGBT issues might operate differently in black and white communities. This study also indicates the strength of religion in Memphis and the powerful influence of the church on the southern LGBT community and movement. I hope to have shown that “queerness’ proper place” lies in no single
racial or ethnic community, political party, church denomination, rural or urban location, or region. More research is needed to fully assess the operation of region within the national LGBT movement, though this study shows that place plays an important role.
List of References


Astor, Vincent, LGBTQ Historian of Memphis. Personal interview. 21 July 2011.

Bates, Beth. Personal interview. 17 Nov. 2011.


Bliss, Michelle. Personal interview. 1 Sept. 2011.


Looper, Mary Helen. Personal interview. 1 June 2011.

Mackenzie, Susan. Personal interview. 2 June 2011.


Mitchell, Mark. Personal interview. 11 Nov. 2011.


Robertson, Mike. Personal interview. 7 June 2011.


Shughart, Sara. Personal interview. 23 Jan. 2012


93


List of Appendices
Appendix A: Interview with Reverend Andy Andrews

This is the interview with Rev. Andy Andrews, Dean of St. Mary Episcopal Cathedral. The interview was conducted in his church office on November 17, 2011 and lasted about forty-five minutes.

**AU:** How did St. Mary’s become a gay-friendly place?

**AA:** Here at the Episcopal Church it’s kind of like an unwritten or unspoken custom that all LGBT folks are welcome, very welcome here and blessed, but it’s not really spoken about largely. I’ll preach about it from the pulpit when I’m talking about other kinds of issues but it’s still, being an advocate, we are more like that sweet southern way, and we all know we have an Uncle Jack who we love or maybe one of our friends has told us we’re gay but it’s not out there trying to change policy, it’s just this slow affirmation. There’s a lot of people here in our leadership who are gay and it’s so accepted it’s beautiful and affirming and we look at it as a gift. But First Congregational, which is in the Cooper-Young district has a minishtty that I really admire. Have you interviewed Cheryl Cornish?

**AU:** I’ve emailed her but have not gotten a response.

**AA:** Keep on her.

**AU:** What is your title here?

**AA:** I am the dean of the cathedral. I’m the chief priest here in charge of this particular church. A cathedral is where the bishop lives, so it’s actually the bishop’s cathedral, and I serve here at his privilege. Dean Andy Andrews is the official title.

**AU:** Where are you from?

**AA:** I’m from Greenville MS. Been in the ministry fifteen years, ordained with the collar on. After I left ole miss I moved to New Orleans, worked in the insurance business there for a while but was really involved with the church and real involved with the inner city kids. I would call that a ministry but not where I had this plastic collar and black polyester shirt on to put it that way.

**AU:** Is the church officially “Open and Affirming?”

**AA:** Not with bold letters. St. Mary’s was started 153 years ago as a house of prayer for all people. That’s kind of our motto, our tag line. And what happened, St. Mary’s was started because all the other churches were paid with a pew tax, someone could go to church if you paid a pew tax and you get your own pew and that was the way you’d upkeep the church. Some leaders said they wanted to start a church that was going to be a house of prayer for all people where slave and slave owner would come, where black and white, male and female, and it was, discussing those issues back 153 years ago, we’ve stretched that tag line to mean everyone. A house of prayer for all people. People of non-faith people who are gay, people who are
Republican, people who are from Arkansas. We’ll even accept them. So we stretch it in that kind
of way. There’s no LGBT friendly, anything like that. The Episcopal Church these days is pretty
much synonymous with LGBT friendly, but nothing overt.

AU: Do you offer any specific programs, like, is there…

AA: We’ve done Bible studies on the Bible and human sexuality, the Bible and homosexuality,
trying to show that there’s many different messages in scripture about that. With conservative
Christianity, they only take one interpretation. Episcopalians teach many different ways to
interpret those passages, so we do that. We just had, the diocese of west Tennessee just
sponsored an anti-defamation workshop against people who are gay and also for our youth
leaders in case they had a teenager come out to them, proper ways of nurturing them and
affirming them and pointing them in the right spaces. The bishop has plans on doing more of that
training for all clergy and also other laities, and so things like that. Those programs are really
starting to happen which is wonderful. There’s also a group called Integrity who are
Episcopalians who happen to be gay and lesbian who meet monthly, and that part of the church
program, and blessed by the bishop, kind of as their own support group.

AU: Has St. Mary’s collaborated with the MGLCC or TEP or gotten involved politically in
Memphis at all?

AA: Nothing political. I would say that they have some of our members, we have some of their
members, but no political action, no campaigning, nothing overt at all. History, we believe that
history is always progressing and evolving. Part of our sense as Episcopalians is that history has
evolved in ways that is part of building more of God’s kingdom here on earth, and it really is our
sense, I can speak for myself, I would say a majority of us feel like we’ll know that the world is
better when the LGBT community has all the same rights as everyone else and affirmed, and
sexuality is looked at as a gift and not as a norm. But nothing yet overt of action. Slowly though,
getting there. I feel like it’s coming along. It’s certainly progressed over my fifteen years as a
priest.

AU: Tennessee has had some success with religious organizing, LGBT activism, those groups
coming together. How would you say Memphis has done sending a Christian message of
equality?

AA: Memphis for its amazing history and also tragic history of racism, sexism, assassination of
Dr. King, [unintelligible] poverty, has an activist root. Methodist, Episcopalian, Jewish
community, a number of Catholics, are in the good fight fighting on all the issues—anti-war anti-
poverty, anti-discrimination for anybody. And I’ve been impressed of all the different places.
And I think Memphis in general is friendly and wide open. When you get out of the, and this is
kind of white middle class I’m talking about, but when you get out passed city limits and into
Shelby County, I think the further people go east the more conservative it is, but inside the city
proper, I think it’s very active. I can’t name any real achievements that have happened, but I just
know it’s always churning the good fight behind the scenes. Another person I want you to talk
to, and he may have a different perspective, I know he does, because he thinks the church is
moving way to slow, is Jonathon Cole. He’s an Episcopalian, but he’s also frustrated with where
we are. I’m giving my perspective from a white, straight person’s, middle aged guy. I’m sure people who are gay and less, would have a much different perspective than saying ‘Oh, everything is fine.’ I’m sure they’re very impatient actually.

AU: You were talking about Memphis’s history of civil rights. An interesting thing about the black church is that it was on the forefront of civil rights but shows some resistance to gay rights. Churches like Bellevue Baptist are staunchly resistant…You would think that might be different…

AA: That’s a mystery to me, too. And I will tell you that Bellevue is actually a predominantly white church and it’s a huge Southern Baptist church, and if anyone is anti-gay or head of the anti-gay movement, it’s that congregation. Southern Baptist. You know, they preach about it all the time. It seems pretty boring. It seem like that’s all they do is talk about how awful other people are. But I don’t know, I’ve never been there, that’s just my perspective from the outside. [19:12] But people of color, in their defense, I have a friend, an African American priest from Clarksdale, he and I share the same views, but for the more kind of conservative, African American congregations seem to be more patriarchal in a sense. Man is head of the household, you know, that kind of sense, so they also tend to read scripture a little more literally of sorts. But it is strange knowing the struggles they’ve had with the whites imposing white supremacy on to them, could it be the same. Gay love is beautiful. I went to California to work in a hospital as part of my seminary training and there I saw for the first time couples who had been together thirty five, forty-five years. I’ve just been married twelve. I pray that my love for my wife can grow to…To me, if you’re a southerner, if you can come around the whole component of your own racism, where if you figure that you grew up in a ‘white is right’ atmosphere, and that black was always second class, if you can get in touch with your own racism, begin to unlearn your own racism, I think it helps you dramatically if you grew up as a straight person in the South and in that culture, understand your homophobia which stretches to the whole transgender thing. It gets more about just your soul and this outer stuff, this flesh is really not as important as a soul. As the child of God that you were made to be. I’ve learned to just honor and accept people’s experiences and count that as the journey God has set them on.

AU: What role has the church played in the local LGBT movement in Memphis?

AA: The metaphor that I’m going to use is probably the same that Dr. King used, that the church is being the tail lights, not the head lights. But the church is on the car and has moved forward with this vehicle for equal rights. It’s not the headlights, it’s really and truly so. And the church gets converted all the time. I mean that’s what the spiritual life is, is to get converted, to be lost and get found again, and I would say that part of the church is the engine that’s stirring up behind the scenes. But it’s the LGBT community here that’s out and making it happen. I’m proud of and aspire to be and move this congregation in that direction, too. We just do it slow, more slow, but it gets there. It’s not radical. It’s not active, but it’s better than the real homophobic congregations and that I know are filled with gay men and women and all kinds of issues. I pray for healing for everything.

[End Andrews].
Appendix: B
Appendix B: Interview with Jermaine Appleberry

This is the interview with Jermaine Appleberry, twenty-four year old black gay male and material handler for Fed Ex. The interview was conducted at the MGLCC on January 11, 2012 and lasts about forty-five minutes.

AU: What do you do here in Memphis?

JA: I am 24 years old. I work for Fed Ex express as a material handler, part time.

AU: Are you gay, straight, bi?

JA: I’m a gay man.

AU: Tell me about your coming out experience.

JA: I came out at 19. I came out to my mother first. I came out specifically because I wanted love and I knew that that was something I could not establish trying to dodge bullets and hide from people, family in general. I’m a firm believer in not hiding from people that you care about and I didn’t want to make [unintelligible] feel like part of a dirty little secret. That was my main reason, and the second reason was because I wanted to do my part in the community as a black gay man. It was a decision that I’m very grateful for, and my mother was very accepting of me. And to this day she is one of my biggest supporters and backbones. So I came out to her and from there just took off. I really, honestly don’t have that many friends. Associates, many, but when I came out to associates there was a mixture of responses. People are not used to a black gay men being that unapologetic and, not out there, but honest. And my family, my family is not that close, but it’s kind of like something that’s either kept up under the radar, they don’t mention it, which I can appreciate because they are not that open minded when it comes to gay people, so it is what it is. I don’t beat them over the head because they have not been the most welcoming. They don’t disrespect me, I just feel like they tolerate me.

AU: Were you born in Memphis?

JA: Born and raised in Memphis.

AU: Do you feel like it is a welcoming place for LGBTs?

JA: No, I feel that we have gay friendly parts of towns, but as far as the city overall, no I don’t.

AU: When did you discover the Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center?

JA: I discovered the center during Pride, no, I discovered the center on the computer when I was looking for gay friendly places in Memphis, and this was one of the places, and I found out it’s like right down the street from where I live, so that was even better. But that’s how I found out about out it. The internet when I was 19.
AU: What role has the center played in your life?

JA: Significant. This is the place I come to as a source of events, things that I can participate in and I can stay active in the community with. My friend there, (Martavius) he is the person who got me further into this building. We use this place to host our meetings for other black gay men where we come together and basically talk about issues that affect us as well as several other things. This center is very much a benefit to myself personally.

AU: Do you go to church in Memphis?

JA: No I don’t.

AU: Were you raised in the church?

JA: I was raised in a religious background and brought up in church as a younger man. I was brought up Baptist, but for the most part we attended a Holiness church. From there we attended another Baptist church and a non-denominational church.

AU: Did the church play a role in your shaping your identity as a gay man?

JA: The church played a role of making it harder to accept who I was, to understand who I was and to come out. They have a certain stance on homosexuality, several stances on homosexuality depending on which church you go to, but my church was very conservative, and they looked down on homosexuality even though a good number of them were gay themselves. So it was more like, ‘We want you here, but we don’t want you being who you are here.’ Or, ‘we don’t want to know who you are.’

AU: Was homosexuality preached on in the churches you attended?

JA: All the time.

AU: How well would you say the LGBT community is integrated?

JA: Racially I don’t feel that there is enough integration. Because, if I can be perfectly honestly with you, and this is just my personal feelings, from a lot of people who are aware of the community, as far as the black perspective goes, they feel that the white gay community does not understand the black gay community and that their issues are not our issues so to speak. And that prevents a lot of integration. And me personally, with other African Americans who are in the community, there is a lack of concern as far as the issues go. A lot of black gay people in the city of Memphis, for their own personal reason are more concerned with relationships, hook ups, and not being known as opposed to being concerned about the community as a whole. So there’s much separation in the community racially, there’s even separation within the races themselves as far as the community is concerned, so there’s much lack of integration.

AU: So you would say the black gay community is more secretive of their sexuality? What might influence that?
JA: They black gay community is very secretive of their sexuality, homosexuality specifically. For one thing, we as black people are very religious, we are very strong in our own religious upbringing. I’m not going to discredit other races religious upbringings, but we as a black people, our church and religion has always played a strong figure as far as black upbringing is concerned. Because from the beginning of slavery, the church, the black friendly church was where we organized in order to establish unity and organize, and that moved down towards the Civil Rights era where we basically had leaders such as Martin Luther King and other ministers were not only ministers, but political figures for the black community as well. So you take that and bring that forth to this very day, that in itself shows that our mentality has been based on religion, or the religion we have been brought forth to believe on. So that plays a highly significant role as to why homosexuality in the black community is so secretive. We as a people have a certain interpretation or belief of the Bible, and it’s also a cultural thing. It’s not only a religious thing, but it’s cultural factors that play a role as far as why homosexuality is so secretive. Church not only plays a religious perspective but a cultural perspective as far as we’re concerned. We incorporate that into other things aside from our belief, so not to mention hip hop culture, which plays a significant role, you know, there’s a high emphasis on being masculine and the whole machismo thing, that plays a big role as well. There’s kind of a double standard, I’m sure this is universal, but there’s kind of a double standard as far as men and women are concerned, as far as homosexuality goes, the black community tends to be more intimidated by gay men as opposed to lesbian women. I believe that goes back to the subconscious feeling that we still have that women are less than men. It’s OK to emulate a man or follow in the footsteps of what’s considered masculine or a man, but if you have a man who is emulating and following in the footsteps of a woman who is seen as less superior, you know, that is a bad thing. So those are some things that play major roles.

AU: How important is visibility for the black gay community?

JA: At this point in time its more crucial than ever. I definitely agree that there’s a major portrayal of the LGBT community being this upper to middle class white image, same-sex attracted image that lacks visibility of other perspectives or in depth of the minorities. You look at Logo, a good number you see on Logos as soon as you click on it are these vacations spas where you see a bunch of white gay couples going to Cancun and Paris, and all the, it’s almost being portraying that it’s all about living the fabulous, white life, but that’s just one of the things that’s doing a great disservice, but it’s crucial more than ever to have black gay images out there just for the sake of getting the black gay community to be a part of or feel like they are a part of the community.

AU: Have you participated in Black Gay Pride or Mid-South Pride?

JA: I’ve participated in both. I didn’t participate in Mid-South this year, unfortunately, because I had to work, but I heard that it was one of the best ones yet because it was truly integrated. It was black, white, you know, all the colors together, and I think that was one of the greatest accomplishments. But I do prefer that one over the Black Gay Pride because, like I said, you know, unfortunately a lot of the black gay scenes and black gay aspects of Memphis, including Black Gay Pride revolve around sex and all those simplistic things. Even down to the flyers, you
look at the flyers, the first thing you see is some guy with an oiled up six pack and some girl with a bikini on, and it’s just, like, all about selling sex. But we do have functions during Black Gay Pride which are truly emotionally and mentally empowering, but the problem is that a good number of black gay folks, black gay men, don’t show up to certain things and if you want to know the truth, I actually don’t think black gay lesbians come to black gay pride. It’s mostly a male’s event.

AU: Do you think it’s still important to have a black gay pride since it is so often that the black gay community is portrayed as white?

JA: For the time being I think it is. I think that we have to take everything as far as baby steps are concerned. And I think that Black Gay Pride helps with that in a way. Everyone may not be mentally [unintelligible] from the community’s perspective about the causes or the issues just yet, but at least it helps to get us to establish and to acknowledge that we are black and gay and that we should not be ashamed of that, that there is nothing wrong with that. I think that it’s necessary right now because, unfortunately, not all of the black community is at a point to where it can merge with a typical LGBTQ pride and focus on certain things aside from which it focuses on at the time being, but, yes, I think it’s necessary.

AU: Do you identify with being black before being gay or vice versa?

JA: I consider them both aspects of me. I don’t identify with one more so than the other. I think the only thing about it is that you are able to see one, and you might not be able to see the other unless you just truly got to know me, but I don’t put one over the other. I think they are just both part of what makes me me.

AU: What challenges might you experience as a black gay male in Memphis?

JA: For one thing, finding love (is a challenge), it’s kind of hard to establish a healthy relationship filled with mentally unhealthy people and people who are not at a point in life where they can maintain healthy relationships. Before you work on a relationship, you have to work on yourself, and, like I said, it’s something we are still working on, is just establishing who we are and feeling comfortable with it and then going into relationships. The second thing is just having the same opportunities as other gay couples in different parts of the country might have in the North, you know, like in new York, gay marriage, such and such, gay rights, a gay friendly atmosphere, you know, San Francisco, Atlanta. Memphis is actually home to one of the major Pentecostal religions—Church of God in Christ, so that church in specific is highly popular among the black community…so that in itself kind of conflicts with being gay here in Memphis, because you’ve got this major thing here going against being gay, but at the same time, you have so many black gay people attracted to that type of church environment, so it’s a major conflict in itself and makes progressing for the LGBT community of color in Memphis much slower and harder.

AU: So religion plays a pretty strong role?
JA: I think religion in the black gay community plays the most powerful role more so than anything.

AU: Are you able to find pockets in Memphis, as a potentially hostile place, do you find spaces of openness?

JA: There are spots. But overall I would not consider Memphis a gay-friendly place by a long shot. It can be hostile physically. More so emotionally and mentally.

AU: What do you like about Memphis?

JA: The history. I love the history of Memphis. I love the business factor. This is one of the major metropolitan areas which businesses are attracted to, Fed Ex. The city has a lot of potential but I don’t think there is enough being done by our politicians to turn this city into the great powerhouse it can be. And again, you know, because it is the South, there is a major traditional mind frame which we are scared to take chances at certain things, but this city has a lot of potential if we just get with the program.

AU: So you would say the conservatism of Memphis holds it back?

JA: Very much so.

AU: Have you ever experienced discrimination at work?

JA: I work for Fed Ex Express, and one thing I can give my company is that it’s very much a gay-friendly environment, very diverse. They are all for diversity, and as a matter of fact, they just passed an ordinance at my job where same-sex domestic partners can put each other down on their insurance plans. For Memphis that is major. So me personally, I don’t feel threatened about being openly gay at my job, but I don’t plan on being at Fed Ex forever, so that does come to my mind when I do decide to go somewhere else, and if for whatever reason, however it does come up at my work environment, you know, will I get fired over this, will I get harassed, will I be able to complain about any possible harassment, you know, it’s, that’s very, a big concern as far as my future is concerned.

[End Appleberry].

105
Appendix: C
Appendix C: Interview with Vincent Astor

This is my interview with Vincent Astor, fifty-eight year old white gay male and journalist and historian of Memphis LGBT life. The interview took place on July 21, 2011 at the MGLCC and was a little over an hour long.

AU: Do you consider Memphis a welcoming place for LGBTs?

VA: It has improved. Memphis has always been kind of live and let live. Memphis is an odd place. It’s always been very insular. Lots of little groups. So having a big community to talk about, that’s difficult. And the same thing where some businesses wouldn’t care, some wouldn’t care very much, some churches wouldn’t care, some are open and affirming, others care very much, but a lot of that has crosses over. It depends on where you want to start. A lot of things have changed since I first came out. It’s generally a good place to go. It’s just that there’s not a place you can focus on, this is the community, this is the gay ghetto, this is where everything is. It’s not like that in Memphis. Hasn’t been for some time. And you have two or three institutions, there aren’t even that many bars in Memphis, two or three institutions that you will find a lot of GLBT people, but not a district.

AU: How might Memphis be becoming a better place for LGBTs to live?

VA: Well, the programs at the community center are one big thing which are addressing a lot of youth issues right now because that’s the problem that came to the center. And, you know, Will can tell you all the details about that, but that was the problem that was realized. I keep sort of at them, I say we have a generation that’s growing old, too, and there’s been some effort to try to organize on that scale but right now the problem is with the very young, which is why the very young are crawling all over the community center because, now there was, there’s another organization, Memphis Area Gay Youth, which is headquartered right down the street at First Congregational which is another, I believe that’s high school and younger, I believe if you grow up or graduate from college you can become maybe an advisor or something, but the group is really for much younger people. Now the second, on the other hand is not focused, they have programs for youth but it’s not focused on any one particular sub group.

AU: Memphis has an odd mix of gay-friendly organizations and very religious ones. How is that played out?

VA: People, if they’re fortunate, find the friendly organizations or make their organizations friendly. Now there are, it took a long time for Federal Express to come around, which is our largest corporate employer. Where I work, International Paper, just for the first time, not the first, its been tried, but the first time Pride month has been acknowledged at the corporate newsletter sort of level was just this year, and Nike has a very active GLBT networking group. And that’s sort of come up through the ranks within these corporations and they’ve discovered or made it so that they’re a safe and friendly space. It gets back to the point of people and it depends on the profile. You know the Episcopal Church is forever waffling on gay and lesbian issues, and the bishop in this diocese is friendly but not really wanting to go out on any limbs. But there are several Episcopal churches that are very welcoming and have been for many years. And it’s due
to the make-up of the congregation and the leadership, whether they choose to be welcoming or not. First Congregational down the street, it actually has an Open and Affirming designation within the United Church of Christ and has since the 1990s. It just depends. There’s an American Baptist Church that ordained a lesbian deacon, Prescott Memorial, but they’ve been at odds with the Southern Baptists anyway because they hired a female pastor, so before having anything to do with gay people they were already on the fringe, got booted out of the southern Baptist convention on account of it. But you can find it. And as Memphis is, the Methodist church on this block may be delighted to have you and open and everything, and the Methodist church ten blocks away, it’s anathema. You know we have Prescott Memorial that’s very open and welcoming and there are some other, there may be some other Baptist congregations that are “live and let live,” but in general, you know, the high profile ones are definitely not, although the choirs and organ lofts are crawling with queers, as is usually the case.

**AU:** I meant to ask you at first, how did you get into LGBT history?

**VA:** I love LGBT history and I guess what really started it for me was the 50th birthday celebration of one of our lesbian pioneers whose name is Sharon Ray, and she owned a series of lesbian bars here for several years and she was also one of the bars to be very friendly to the leather community, and when I went to her 50th birthday celebration, and I was a correspondent at one of the local newspaper at the time, I don’t know if it was *Gaze* back then or the *Triangle Journal*, and it’s all in there, all in those top two drawers, 1976 until about two years ago, also in the public library. I looked at this group of people and I thought, ‘Hmmm, there will never be another gathering like this again,’ and I recorded some, I wrote about others, and listened to a lot of people’s stories, and there were a lot of people alive then who had been pioneers, had been through the raids and harassment. In fact, there’s an article in one of the last issues of the triangle journal about people who were in a group picture from a famous raid where the charges were dropped and several of them were in drag, and then you know what thirty years later, interviewing them about the same thing. More of those people were alive, and I got to hear all the stories, and I just happen to absorb a lot of them and write a good bit of them down and show it to people like yourself and Daneel Buring who wrote *Behind the Magnolia Curtain*. I helped in that way. And so I was thinking the other day, everybody’s always calling me the unofficial historian of the GLBT community here in Memphis and I’ve already talked to Will and said, “Well, why in the hell aren’t I official?!.” You know, there was never a position, but I’m the original queen who remembers too much.

**AU:** You are from Memphis?

**VA:** Yes, I was born here in 1953, raised Catholic, had a parochial education up through the end of high school, came out in high school to myself and then came out publicly, oh, I guess towards the end of college and started going out to the bars and so forth. And then in 1980, there was a new activist organization called the Memphis Gay Coalition which had been founded in 79 after the first March on Washington. And I got involved with that, because I wanted to get to know people and I wanted to make friends outside of the bar, you know, it’s two different worlds. And I wanted to get to know people I could count on and so I got involved in the activist community.
AU: What sort of institutions, or just any aspect of Memphis might stand in the way of progress for the local movement here?

VA: The Republican Party, you know, about all the nonsense that’s been going on in the state legislature, which is just spiteful, I mean there’s no real reason, isn’t there something else you can legislate about? It’s a waste of time, waste of the tax payer’s money. The Southern Baptist Convention, I can’t really think of a particular institution, oddly enough, and I don’t know the recent, but it’s sometimes the bar owners themselves that really keep the community back, and it’s happened over and over again because somebody opens a business and wants to make lots and lots of money off of lots of gay people, and they want to have control of that and control of the community outside of their customer base, and one owner of a large bar, and I don’t know, it was closed as a public nuisance several months ago, I don’t know if it’s open again or not, but would harass, alternately help and harass the Pride organization because they thought that they were so big that they should be in control of things besides their own business. That’s happened three or four memorable times in the history of Memphis. And I don’t know if that’s a threat, it’s probably not a threat right now if this place has opened up again, but it’s sort of perpetuating the smoke filled rooms, dirty bathrooms, drugs available, all the seediest sides of the community and those are always going to be there—there’s always going to be peep shows, there’s always going to be sex in the park and things like that, but it sort of helps perpetuates that to make one guy [unintelligible]. But I can’t think of any real, I can think of more positive institutions than I can any one particular place that’s influential that’s negative. You can go through the list of corporations here, you know, which ones are friendly and which ones are not.

AU: my next question was going be which organizations like the Tennessee Equality Project and the Center, what other organizations have played a major role in the progression of the movement?

VA: Holy Trinity Community Church is one of them. There’s several of the Open and Affirming churches such as Holy Trinity and First Congregational are both United Church of Christ, which is a very liberal denomination in general.

AU: That’s funny because Church of Christ is so not liberal.

VA: This is United Church of Christ, which is why the two in Memphis go by there original names, First Congregational and Holy Trinity Community Church, and they have a United Church of Christ, the UCC after their name, because in the South it’s very confusing. In the North it’s not because the Southern based Church of Christ is not as pervading in the North and Midwest, but down here, that’s why you’ll see that all the UCC churches go by there older names so they won’t get confused. I mentioned MAGY (Memphis Area Gay Youth), The welcoming churches, and Mid-South Pride of course. Pride right now is really one place where more people from most of these little islands where people turn up, and the Community Center is another. But Pride isn’t a club, Pride isn’t a building, so that makes it a little different. They put on one major event a year and they go around doing fundraising at a lot of the other little venues, and then when the festival comes up, you know, you see lots of different people from lots of different places. And during the first part of the AIDS pandemic there were AIDS events where people who wouldn’t speak to one another at the bar were folding, stuffing envelopes, sitting
next to one another. That was a very unifying, that crisis was very unifying. But the only thing I can really think of, unless there’s another crisis, you know, there were a lot of, when the marine sign got defaced, that rallied a lot of people for a short while, and the action in the legislature rallied a lot of people at the beginning, but those are the ones that I can think of. And some people that are a little more active than I am might can give a couple of more.

AU: How would you describe the racial and ethnic make-up of the active gay community? Would you say that organizations are pretty integrated?

VA: It’s very insular. The community center and mid south pride are two organizations, and the churches as well, have striven, all the ones I’ve mentioned have striven to be inclusive and integrated, but due to the nature of Memphis, Tennessee, it works only to a certain degree. And people keep asking, ‘Well, why is there such a thing as a black pride?,’ because they want it that way. The two prides are very different and they work together and there’s no animosity, it’s just that they’re two different things. I don’t know what there is in the African American community that is supportive, that has come out of that community particularly. For a long time we had a group, it was Black and White Men Together, but still that was a biracial organization and that would mean nothing to a lot of strictly African American people. There’s a lot of repression in the black community, from families from churches, from everywhere, and I don’t know what they have to offset that. Black people are so busy being black that going to an integrated organization isn’t always what’s happening. Now for the very young, it changes with age. The very young are very naturally integrated with one another in a lot of ways. It’s just like walking in here I was greeted by an Asian man and an African American transgendered person all in the same breath practically, but it’s something that’s just developing. And that generation of people may succeed, which has less baggage than mine or even the one right after me, or surely the ones before. Once again, it’s all these little groups. And it’s not for want of trying because I’ve been watching it for years.

AU: There’s a quote in Gay and Lesbian Memphis: Building Communities Behind the Magnolia Curtain, “People who cross dress have been some of the most vocal and visible people in the black community as people who readily identify as gay.” Just in the community in general, it sounds like just being open and visible makes a statement to Memphians at large. Do you consider social activities like going to Pride events, or going to bars, or just being out a form of activism?

VA: Yes. Definitely. Because you’re in your own little safe space, but there are many other places that are not so safe. I haven’t been to the St. Patrick’s Day parade with the gay contingent yet, because they don’t have, it just blows my mind that they’re in a St. Patrick’s day parade where gays are banned in other cities in the country, and on Beale Street, which is redneck tourist heaven, but I’ve just never managed to make it down there, and it just sort of blows my mind that they were invited. Of course, I’ve been in an old Cotton Carnival parade where they encouraged the formation of a gay krewe, and I was involved in that. In fact, we were in the children’s parade in costume and in character and, our costumes, once we got to march in the grand parade—

AU: Was that just that year?
VA: Just that year. Because one of the organizers, you know, the whole idea of Cotton Carnival, which is held in May, it’s sort of, Memphis had a Mardi Gras in the 19th century, and in the 30s, cotton carnival was put together, a big pageantry sort of week of events that was to promote the sale of cotton and it still exists, but when it was, it was a very high society event that everybody else got to watch the events that they paid for, and they incorporated more people into it, well the part that was supposed to be much more public morphed into Memphis in May and separated from Cotton Carnival which is now back to being high society, and there may be one parade and there may not be, and you read about the balls in the paper and there is a king and queen of Cotton Carnival, but you read about them once or twice in the newspaper and that’s it. And cotton is also not as important. And that was kind of an effort, the person that was trying to put some life into it was thinking the gay krewes play a big part in Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and they thought, ‘Well, we can do the same thing here,’ and that’s what they tried to do and it lasted a year.

AU: Is there a reason it only lasted a year?

VA: People were less than encouraged from the Cotton Carnival side and less than interested in being one of those kind of krewes. We were doing all of our own stuff. Way back in the 60s and early 70s there was a parallel set of ball clubs in the gay and lesbian community which put on all these fabulous balls once a year with drag debutantes, and big themes, and very elaborate pageants and it was the big social event of the year and that ran its course, but at that time, the drags ruled. They really ruled, because they were the ones that were in your face, they were the ones that were not afraid to go to jail. If you convinced a drag queen to put on a benefit for anything you would raise several thousand dollars in a matter of a few hours and everybody came because it was a big event, there wasn’t that much to do. We even did muscular dystrophy for several years. The first one that I remember was sometime in the 70s and someone decided to do a big drag show to benefit muscular dystrophy and to give it to the telethon, and the local representative refused the money. And the organizer called Las Vegas and they said, “If they won’t take it, we will.” I actually was one of the people that went on TV with a very awkward and embarrassed Olin Morris (morning host WREG) to present the money which was among the top fund raisers in the city for muscular dystrophy, and that ran its course when there were other things to think about. But you’re right about the in your face people. But to some degree, yes, but we have the ‘don’t ask don’t tell’ people, the young people who want to bring a same-sex partner to their prom, there are others as well.

AU: Gay and Lesbian Memphis was published in 1997 and covers gay life in Memphis from 1940-1980. What kind of changes may have occurred more recently relative to Memphis gay life in general or the LGBT movement?

VA: The community center opened in 1990 and its really at its most influential right now. Since it got into this building, its influence has grown and its become very representative, especially since we got a full time executive director, there is a face and a location and a phone number that everybody can call for a comment, and on the other side, it is a very active and pro-active organization. See, it, (the book) ended in 1980, which means it ended before AIDS, that was before Friends for Life, that was before Heart Strings, that was before that crisis, which, how that
affected people, the people who lived through it, it hasn’t diminished, the people who have come after reacted to it differently.

AU: How was their reaction different?

VA: They haven’t lost friends to it. They haven’t watched beautiful men die too soon and have nobody really care that they’re dying. That was what AIDS was all about. People all around were dying, there was no treatment, there was no stopping it, and No. Body. Cared. That is why I will never honor Ronald Regan for anything. I don’t care. I would piss on his body. There was that, that came after the book. The 90s, well the community center was growing, activism was growing, there were two marches on Washington that period, 93 and 2000, where people were really trying to come together nationally. Memphis has changed a lot. All of the entities that I have spoken of post-date that book. The community center, MAGY, the churches, Friends for Life, all of that came after though we had a couple of churches that came out of the community at that time. There was an MCC (Metropolitan Community Church) and there was an independent church that was active during that time period, and those either merged with the ones that we have now, and the MCC just petered out. I think most of the people that went there just ended up going to another church because the community as a whole has changed radically, because there aren’t as many gay bars, and not as many people go for different reasons. Because you can go with your partner most anywhere, you don’t have to double date with two lesbians or have cover girls to go to the theater. You can go to dinner and a movie with your partner and nobody thinks much about out if at all about it, and there’s just lots and lots more you can do, and be out or be with someone you want to be with than there was in 1980. The possibility for harassment or trouble is a lot less just in the civilized world. If you’re going to hang out in redneck bars and things like that, you know, but once again, it depends on where you go. But most people who want to go to dinner and a movie, or dinner and a play, or dinner and a concert, it doesn’t matter. So the bars that lost that influence and the strictly gay and lesbian organizations have lost that necessity, so it’s changed an awful lot, just gay life in general.

AU: Is Midtown sort of a progressive area of Memphis where there’s a lot of LGBT activity?

VA: Well, it is, because Midtown is very eclectic and it has a lot of the elements, Mid-Town has beautiful houses and beautiful property, so you’re going to attract gay and lesbian people who like that sort of thing, who like to remodel, who like to live in nice houses in very mixed neighborhoods. This one in particular is a very eclectic neighborhood and a lot of gay and lesbian people moved here because of the eclecticism, in fact, the outgoing president of the neighborhood association was a gay man with a partner, and he ended up resigning because he moved out of town to a different job. I don’t know if he was the first or not, but in this particular neighborhood there’s always been a lot of activism. The neighborhood newspaper carried the story about the community center surpassing its fundraising goal just recently, and it was just neighborhood news. So Midtown is one neighborhood, you know, there’s a whole clutch of gays and lesbians that live in Bartlett, and I don’t know, I think—they are out there, and a lot of people know one another socially, but they like to live in a place where you sign your name in blood to keep your lawn mowed, you know, it’s one of those suburbs that’s very conscious of its image and Germantown is the same way but there’s that style, that type of, one of the things that’s most interesting about homosexuality is that it crosses
every boundary. There’s every kind of a queer that there is a person, which sometimes makes it, really blows your mind, and I may have discovered what the commonality is. And try and make this observation for yourself—every queer person has a little bit of extra temperament. There’s something temperamental, something that has to be dealt with, and you sort of, that’s the best way that I can describe it, and people have it to a greater or lesser degree, and maybe its sensibility, but there’s a little sensibility issue that we all seem to have in common. And the best way to exemplify that is that it takes enough diplomacy to organize one drag benefit, to qualify you for the UN, in order to get a bunch of temperamental drag queens on one stage to do one show for one cause, you can then join the UN. You have diplomatic credentials. And that’s just the way it works. Drag queens tend to be more so because they’re more of everything. They’re more dressed up, they’re more painted, they’re more flamboyant, they’re more theatrical, they’re more temperamental, I know—that’s me (points to picture of himself in drag). So I know what I’m talking about. So I know whereof I speak. But I think that’s one commonality that we all have. Is the little extra that has to be dealt with.

AU: It seems like LGBT institutions are lasting longer that the ones Buring writes about. What might account for that? [36:35]

VA: Well, the Memphis Gay Coalition lasted from December 1979 to the summer of 1991. I forget how old Holy Trinity Church is. It’s temperament again. It truly is. I can give you three examples. One, there was, one of the old ball clubs was the Queen’s Men, and that was one of the drag ball clubs that shadowed, ala Mardi Gras, but was related to Cotton Carnival. There were some people that decided that they didn’t like the way things were going so they founded a chapter of the Mystic Krewe of Apollo which was one of the premier gay krewes of New Orleans, that was another one. There were some other people who wanted to strike out on their own and do things a little bit differently and they created a third ball club, Gay on Poplar Street, GOPS. And those two ran alongside, they went to each other’s functions, but they really didn’t want to be in the same club. In the leather community, the oldest of the leather clubs, which for gay men are basically like fraternities, you pledge, it’s a whole big loyalty thing, it’s very much organized as a fraternity. Saurus was the oldest, a bunch of people got put out of Saurus and founded a club called Wings, some people didn’t like the way that Wings were going so they founded one called Alliance, and there at one time were five, one of which was female because the men’s clubs originally were all male and didn’t want to admit women. Sauruas, well, that’s another story. With the oldest clubs, female members are very much the exception. As the others formed, they invited female members from the beginning or admitted them very early on without much discussion. So there ended up being six. And they came and went as people were interested in doing them. And then just recently there were two Mardi Gras krewes, the Mystic krewe of Memphis United, and the Krewe of Pegasus. And some people, the Mystic Krewe of Memphis United was founded by one woman, and it was in the bylaws that she had veto power over everything and everybody. Well, some people moved away from that club and founded the Mystic Krewe of Pegausus which was much more democratically organized, and Memphis United folded. We have two leather krewes left, Saurus and Tennessee Leather Tribe. And one Mardi Gras Krewe and the three old ball clubs all petered out. People just got tired of doing it. That’s one of the reasons I think that Memphis Untied went away, it started getting really expensive and people were just tired of doing it every year. Pegasus is much more solid and they, I forget how old they are, but they do a benefit usually outside the GLBT community, but they’re
very involved with things outside the community as well. And like many organizations, there’s usually a core group of maybe five or six people, a dozen at the most, and when they get tired, it goes away.

**AU:** What would you say has impacted the MGLCC here for lasting, and also, I know a couple of years ago, they weren’t sure if it was still going to be here because of financial issues, and then just recently they surpassed their goal…

**VA:** Well, there was a point in the community center’s life when it was stored in a garage apartment behind where I was living. It had no space. And in the constitution it said it was supposed to be a location. The trouble was, at the time, the board was so busy paying the rent that they couldn’t do programs. And we tried very, very hard, I served twice in officer capacities with the center, and it kept moving to different locations, but when the movement came to really try to revive it, the money was raised first, put into an endowment, then the space was looked for, and the building was bought by someone who was sitting on the board, and the center eventually bought it from them. So it went sort of in that order. When it was first founded, and it said we raised a lot of seed money and then rented the space and was sort of a ‘if you build, they will come’ kind of attitudes, and different boards had different attitudes. But now it was very much restructured on the order of a business, and then there’s plenty of money in the endowment but its earmarked for certain things, and then there’s a lot of grant money that came in but its earmarked for youth programs, and suddenly there was a shortfall and that’s what this most recent campaign was for, to cover the shortfall and to say that this is the part of the organization where we need to do some work, we need to plan better for this sort of thing. And everybody took the lesson very, very well, and I don’t think it will happen again. But the community center has been pretty lucky. There have been people, always been support, but not necessarily monetary. And then how do we go about getting that. But it’s very, very stable right now.

**AU:** Has it in the past couple of years grown as far as members…

**VA:** There are no members, just donors. That’s a Will question. I come in like everyone else does. I have not come in and served really except to come in and re-arrange the artifacts every so often. My United Way money goes to this institution. I put it down as a recipient and it’s a 501C3, and they send my check every autumn. In fact, I mean to tell Will, when you get my check, will this be a good thing to go in the weekly newsletter, I just got United Way money, you know, we will get money from United Way and here’s how you can do it.

**AU:** Is this one of the only gay and lesbian community centers in the Mid-South?

**VA:** The MGLCC is the only one the Mid-South, I would say, yes. The closest would be Little Rock, which I think has some kind of a center, and Nashville.

**AU:** What do you think just having the center and the flag out there means to the LGBT community in Memphis? How important is it to have the space and a network of people?

**VA:** I think extremely. I think, just like in the last campaign, a lot of people who just sort of live their own lives and know the community center is there and that’s nice and all and they’re happy
that it’s here, when there’s crisis they cough up a little extra money. I think it’s important that many people support it in theory, you know, they like the fact that we have a community center, and, sort of, life goes on. It’s very important because this has been a focal point for the community; it has been for some time. You find out about it if you’re a youth. People of my generation and people who came out in the years before I did are still absolutely in awe and wonder that this place exists, because we ask ourselves what would it have been like, how much easier would it have been, how much better would it have been if we had had some place we knew about where we could say ‘what is going on?’ The people that did the marching are still in awe of this place.

AU: How might Memphis compare to other southern cities?

VA: I don’t know. I just know that Memphis is a lot of little islands, a lot of different groups that don’t necessarily get together much at all. There’s plenty of gay life, there’s not really one place where you kind of find, it’s not like the districts in San Francisco and in Chicago and in Houston, you know, where there’s a whole district where you can go there and say, ‘Well, this is queer land.’ Memphis at one time had part of Madison Avenue where there was a bunch of bars lined up and down, in fact, the community center had a Madison Avenue location once when there was a kind of, but there isn’t any more.

AU: Just from reading the Magnolia Curtain book there have been some instances of racism and sexism within the movement. How would you describe the present day social climate among a more diverse groups of LGBTs?

VA: Well, it depends on the age of the people involved. The very young seem to be integrating and doing a lot of things together because they’ve all gone to school together, especially when they get into higher education, and it’s that way in the corporate world because the largest employers in Memphis are international organizations and so they’re microcosms of this international diversity. I mean, I see people from all over the world several times a day all over the cafeteria. I work as a mail clerk, so I deliver the mail and I see people from all over the world every step I take. I find it, because I grew up when I did, I find it really, really difficult, you know, I have to consciously be more accepting and consciously not think of stereotypes and so forth. Young people are much less likely to, there are more of the very young that are less like that, that will be truly diverse and truly integrated, and I’m not just talking black and white either.

AU: As the younger generations rise in the LGBT movement, do you think that’s going to spur on more legislation beneficial to LGBTs?

VA: If they get mad enough. Unfortunately, many of the very young are very young, and they have attitudes that the very young have. They’re very preoccupied with themselves and what’s going on around them and the latest things that’s happening and so forth. They may or may not have gotten to that awareness yet.

AU: In the past there’s been a lot of discrimination coming from the Memphis police. How might that have changed?
VA: Depends on whether it’s an election year. On the books, in the regs, there’s not supposed to be any kind of discrimination. It once again depends on the individual policeman and the individual situation. There are gay policeman, a number of them, and there are a number of redneck policeman. It just depends on the attitude and it depends on, I wouldn’t at all be surprised if the transgender woman who ended up being murdered gave a cop some lip, it wouldn’t surprise me at all. Because I really have no idea of the, and we may never know the whole story, Duanna Johnson was her name. And it’s not a good idea to give a cop lip ever for any reason, you know, nail it to them later, but not when you’re in the middle of something, when they’ve got their cop on. Because you will hear from police that they are just as frightened walking up to a car with a gun in their hand as the person in the car that the gun may be pointed at. Because you never know when it might not turn the other direction and they’re just, its, it depends on the situation, it’s very individual. Generally, they’re not supposed to discriminate. I have been told there are cops on the force just because they like to mess with people, and it gives them an opportunity. This is people all over the place, you know, just mess with people in general. And at least now there is a recourse. Duanna Johnson got a lot of coverage in the newspaper, and if nothing else, there was a general order, ‘Tone it down.’ They had some policy changes, you know, in order not to get publicity, in order not to get your ass canned, you have to cool it. There was no recourse for a very, very long time. That plaque right there in the corner, the one with the angel figure on it, that’s the winners of the Miss Gay Memphis Pageant which was first held in a public place in 1969 about almost six months after Stonewall. The people that held that pageant were literally putting their lives, their jobs, their families, their livelihoods, everything on the line. But they had it on Halloween night when you can dress any way you want to. And they peppered the audience with RGs, with real girls. And they got away with it. And that pageant is considered the turning point. And part of it was pure luck, because at the same time, when were beginning to wear pant suits in the workplace, so all the cross dressing ordinances started going over like dominoes, because women are wearing pants, how can you enforce this? So there was very little recourse, and for a long while after that, after the police raids, I was present for at least one or two of the fire department raids on the gay bars, and I remember it very plainly. Someone in a uniform would come to the door and it would get very, very quiet and everyone would have to sit down. And if the bar could contain enough people, as many people as could be seated and the rest was considered over-crowding, and they had to leave. Of course they didn’t leave for very long, they came right back. I have felt the very end of that atmosphere of like, ‘what’s going to happen?’, and of course, I was in drag, so, ‘what’s the worst that’s going to happen?’. And it was, there’s the same story about a lesbian bar, the Psyche Out, there was a doorman, you had to go by a doorman with a cover charge as if it were a private club. And there was dancing when same-sex dancing was against city ordinance, and if a light came on everything stopped and in less than two minutes the dance floor was covered with tables and chairs and everyone was seated. It was a drill that was rehearsed and everyone knew what to do and they got away with it. The woman who owned that bar can tell you these stories. She lives right down the street. Sharon Ray. And so that has improved, there is recourse, there are internal regulations, you know, you can get the laws hand slapped.

AU: Do you see Memphis adopting a city ordinance in the next couple of years?

VA: If Nashville will leave us alone, there may be a discrimination ordinance like the county has, I don’t know how specific it will be, see, since there is so much, so much of government is
operated out of the African American community and the African American clergy are a lot more virulent than the white clergy, the white clergy could be convinced to go along with it, but the black clergy are adamant, and that’s one of the things that’s holding us back. That’s one of the things they accused of proposition 8, that it was the black clergy that got behind that. And I work with people who are like this, whatever their preacher says, they will swallow it whole and not even think about it and just do it. I don’t, I can’t say, it’s possible, but it will be with protest.

AU: Do you see the recent bills that were proposed (Don’t Say Gay, city ordinance block), do you see them holding up?

VA: No, I don’t think they’ll hold up in court. I don’t think they’ll hold up in court at all. I think it’s a bunch of Republicans trying to get re-elected. The ‘Don’t Say Gay,’ I don’t think passed this session, I don’t that one actually passed, I think it passed committee but, you know, there’s time to get with people and time for enough backlash. The whole Planned Parenthood business is just so ridiculous because of the other work that Planned Parenthood does. It’s just, these people have such one track minds. But I don’t think they’ll end up standing up in court if they do pass, and maybe we can keep them from passing. Because it’s really, I don’t know how the state constitution reads, but why is Nashville interfering with a Memphis problem, why? Why are people in east Tennessee telling people what they can and can’t do? It doesn’t make sense. I really have always thought that West Tennessee should succeed. I really have. If the Ford’s had still been in power and, you know, Harold Ford could have become governor, we might have brought it on. Because, we have nothing in common with Knoxville and Chattanooga, not even the geography. Tennessee really shouldn’t’ exist. They used to call it the ‘three states of Tennessee.’ It’s something that’s going to have to be worked out and others are taking care of that.

AU: In the past fifteen years or so, how has the local movement in Memphis progressed in light of conservatism, in light of the Republican influence and all that?

VA: Well, we have friends in high places. There is the county non-discrimination ordinance. Shelby County includes a general non-discrimination clause as far as county employees and county contractors. It’s not specific like several people wanted it to be, but they took that as a beginning.

AU: It does include sexual orientation?

VA: It includes nothing. It’s non-specific. It’s just non-discrimination, but that was considered a beginning and it was accepted. And then we have, it’s like when we had the rally down at First Congregational concerning the legislative events, and part of that was trying to bring a lot of small groups together, Latinos, women’s groups, gay groups, it was a general sort of a rally, and at Pride, too, we got our congressman, Steve Cohen, we got state senator Beverly Marrero, we got somebody from the Tennessee house, we have somebody from the county commission, there are people who don’t think about it, they just come. It’s not sticking your neck out as badly. Steve Cohen is incredibly courageous. He was speaking at Pride rallies way back when it was dangerous to do so, to his career. And, you know, he ended up in the U.S. congress. Things are definitely better. Things definitely improve a little bit all the
time. It’s still little steps in many ways, but it’s such a huge improvement over the people that I talked to many years ago who are dead now. It’s light years since that plaque was first made. And if you, what I might invite you to do is just go into that file cabinet, pick out a newspaper and see what’s in it. The oldest periodical is from July 1975, and the most recent one is December of 2007.

[End Astor].
Appendix D: Interview with Beth Bates

This is the interview with fifty-six year old white male to female transgender Beth Bates, retired medical researcher and physical trainer. The interview was held at the MGLCC on November 16, 2011 and lasted approximately one hour.

BB: My transition started in 2003. And I’ve been an advocate, I’ve been the transgender coordinator for PFLAG, I’ve done lectures at CVU, their Psychology Department, I’ve done lectures at University of Tennessee’s Medical Department of Psychiatry. Here I’ve been involved in fundraisers with this group, been helping with the transgender youth through MAGY (Memphis Area Gay Youth). It’s basically a don’t ask don’t tell type of thing (Her trans identity). People know but I don’t advertise.

AU: What do you do here in Memphis?

BB: I’m retired now from UT (University of Tennessee). I was in medical research. I worked there thirty-one years, and I retired there last year. Now I’m a personal trainer at the YMCA system.

AU: How old are you?


AU: Would you say that there’s a transgender community in Memphis?

BB: There’s a population. I don’t think that it’s necessarily a community, no. maybe for younger folks, but not really.

AU: Do you feel like Memphis is a welcoming place for LGBTs?

BB: No. Certain sections of Memphis, yes, but in general, not.

AU: Midtown?

BB: This area, yes. In general, no.

AU: Do you attend church here?

BB: Irregularly. I’ve gone to the Episcopal church here, I’m a member there. I’ve gone to the Lutheran church, I’ve gone to the Unitarian church, and I’ve gone to the First Congregational Church.

AU: You’re involved in a lot of activism. Have you been involved in church activism?

BB: First Congregational, when I was attending regularly there, they have the youth group MAGY, and I was involved with helping the youth, LGBT youth there and through the First Unitarian Church of the River, I spoke down there to the kids as well. The Episcopal church the,
group downtown Calgary. Integrity, I actually went to a couple of their functions and spoke to
them about transgender issues as well.

AU: What do you like about life in Memphis?
BB: It’s slow, easy. And you can get lost if you want to and there’s enough going on. It’s a good
city. It’s always been since I got here in ’79. It’s racially polarized and it always will be. It’s just
the demographics of the city.

AU: How well is the trans community racially integrated?

BB: They’re not as involved. And it’s mostly a fear of being found out type of thing. Once again,
the community in general is not very accepting. Pastor Tim down the street here at Holy Trinity
has done a good job of integrating folks in that area. And I’ve actually spoken with a few people,
the pastor Cheryl Cornish at First Congregational has put me in touch with several trans black
individuals, and I met with them in her office and talked with them on a one on one basis, but it’s
very, secretive community. The black community is much more condemning in general.

AU: Would you say that comes from the religious aspect or the community in general?
BB: It’s just the community in general and the religion. I mean this is the Bible Belt for Christ
sake. If you’re not us you’re evil in some way. It’s the old clan mentality. If you’re not clan, I’m
not talking about KKK, I’m talking about cave man klan, if you’re not klan you are to be killed
because you’re not part of us.

AU: What role has this place (MGLCC) played?
BB: I have met some individuals through the MGLCC. I’ve helped them with one of the
fundraising activities, did a gala concert and history a few years ago and I was one of the co-
hostesses for us. Vincent Astor and I were the ones that did that. And it’s been a source of
information, it’s been a, it’s like an oasis that you can come if you need to. I was involved in
PFLAG with them for maybe four or five years and they were very, very good. I think that
organization and they (MGLCC) sort of piggy back of each other here. It’s been a really good
working relationship.

AU: What are some of the challenges you face a transgender her in Memphis?
There’s been several transgender murders here. And it’s just not in, Tennessee, if you were born
in Tennessee, you unfortunately have no choice because they won’t even let you change your
birth certificate.

AU: Were you able to?
BB: Yes, from North Carolina. I have birth certificate, passport, everything. But I was involved
with, when Congressman Cohen was a state representative, I was involved with him, emailing
back and forth. He actually had legislation introduced in the state house to allow for changes on
the birth certificate and this included people who were intersex, and if you’re familiar with babies, they don’t know whether they’re male, whether they’re female, and the correct recommendation is to let them mature to the point where they show traits of female or male as far as their psychological profiles, and then you give them the appropriate hormones and do whatever is necessary surgically and therefore they would need to correct, if the doctor said well this is female on the birth certificate, they would be able to go back and say, no, the birth certificate is wrong. Intersex individuals can’t even change their birth certificate. They get crossed over, the male crossed out and female written above it in Tennessee. Tennessee I think is one of four states that won’t allow birth certificate changes.

AU: Have you lived in other places besides North Carolina?

BB: I went to the University of North Carolina. That’s a very, even in the seventies they had a very strong gay alliance on campus so it was very welcoming and opening there, whereas, I, like you, grew up in a little bitty town in North Carolina where you weren’t different. You just weren’t. You wouldn’t survive if you were.

AU: How might attitudes towards transgenders have changed?

BB: Maybe a ten degree shift towards acceptance. It’s extremely slow. What most people see in the press and the media and so forth is the extreme bad, and the extreme that doesn’t present, well, this is just a normal person who has had this transition or who is a normal person functioning in society, maybe a doctor, maybe a lawyer, maybe a politician, maybe a school teacher, maybe a whatever. They’re just a normal person, and that’s not hardly ever portrayed to the public. And one reason is people like me don’t really want to go out there and say, ‘Yes this is me, yes I transitioned, yes this is …’, because once you do that there’s no pulling back. You can’t let those words back in the bottle, and then you become a subject of hate crimes, and you can become targets of discrimination openly and secretively, and you present, if you have family, all of your family becomes targets, and I’m not willing to do that at all. If I had not had family and I had not had children and so forth, yeah, I would be more open and a spokesperson, and be out there and say, ‘Look, I’m just a normal person.’ But you can see across the country from people who have come out, and they’ve been in positions, whether it be the person in Florida who was the city council person, city coordinator, their lives just fell apart, their families just fell apart and so much, it, so much, so it’s better to just say ’uh uh.’

AU: What would you like to see changed as far as public policy?

BB: I would like to see the equal, non discrimination act completely be open, including all transgender, gender expression, gender identity to be included in all of that. The marriage laws must change. It has to become a national, same-sex marriage must become available to all. Right now I could go and get married to a man. Because my birth certificate, everything else says female, and then someone would come up and the legalities of that would still be questioned. It’s one of those…you know, and the education curriculum in our whole system is so skewed towards straight everything, no deviation from anything, and there’s still not enough separation between church and state. It’s getting worse and not better. And we’re not as free as we used to be. Thank you Dick Cheney” [laughs].
AU: How has your family accepted? Or how have they reacted?

BB: My family currently is fantastic. I have two children and with them, what I did was explain to them what was going on, they were teenagers at the time, and then I basically just said I don’t think you should have to be around while this whole process is going on if you don’t want to be, that’s fine. So I moved out. And I said, ‘I’m here, I always will be here,’ and so forth and so on, and I let them process things, ask questions, come to me, see me when they wanted to see me and so forth, and now we have a fantastic relationship. It’s like they’ve got two moms. So it’s fantastic. I have two kids. They’re both in their twenties.

AU: Do you feel like a part of a specific community here in Memphis, like the LGBT community? I guess I’m thinking in Memphis, how much of a “community” is there?

BB: I think there is a good community, but it’s very cliquish and there’s even discrimination within the LGBT community. There’s quite a bit. I mean, people think, ‘well, if you’re gay and lesbian than you accept transgender.’ Well, no. There’s a pecking order almost within the community. You’re gay, lesbian and then transgenders are down here, so the gays and lesbians feel comfortable picking on transgenders because they’re sort of viewed by them as the bottom of the barrel of the pecking order as it may be.

AU: So the T in LGBT…

BB: The T is last. It’s last and it’s second, third, fourth class citizen as it may be, and that’s one of the reason I think suicide rates among transgenders is so bloody high. So bloody high.

AU: Do you feel that there is a tangible local movement, or that things, there’s a push for things to change?

BB: No. I don’t. The Tennessee Equality Project has been doing some, but that was mostly a sort of a knee jerk response to the hate crimes and the issues that happened with the Memphis police department and murders locally, sort of like a roman candle that flared up and then went away. I don’t think there’s any driving force behind any change, I really don’t. And for the most part I think it’s beating your head up against a brick wall. Because if you look at the composition of the city council, if you look at the composition of the county commissioners, there’s not going to be any gender equality, much less gay less transgender equality.

AU: So that anti-discrimination ordinance that I think failed twice, or there been several attempts, did it include gender expression or gender identity?

BB: I don’t know, and that’s one of the things with the national non-discrimination act, they said ‘no, you have to take out gender identity and gender expression,’ and PFLAG said, ‘no, absolutely not. You must leave that in,’ and there were some other backers to leave it in, and nothing passed. So it’s not going passed. So once again, transgender are, ‘Oh, we’ll get to y’all later.’ And the movement for transgenders is sort of like where the GLBT movement was in the sixties. We are about that far behind if you think of a chronological time table, and the thing of it
is the community is even smaller and less vocal so the time table for moving anything forward will take longer than it did for the gay and lesbian community. Because like it or not, the HIV virus was something that not only was a horrible for the gay community, but also united a lot of people in the community and brought together a lot of different groups, and that’s, history is going to look back and say, ‘Gosh, how did this come forward, how did we not see throughout history that there have been people who are gay, lesbian, transgender?’ I mean you’ve done the research of the different cultures around the world, you know it’s in every culture. It’s just like every culture has a creation story and almost every culture has a flood story.

AU: Are you with the same partner?

BB: No. I’m divorced and the girl I’ve been with now, been with for four years. And I dated men for a while, didn’t like that [laughs]. And that’s the other things that people don’t understand is they think they can’t get the concept of sex between the ears and sex between the legs, gender identity between the ears, sex between the legs. And it’s hard for people to understand the concept of how you think of yourself here [points to head] is not directly related to what you have between your legs.

AU: Or what you are attracted to.

BB: And that’s the third thing. And one of the lectures that I do, it’s like you have an X axis which is gender, so you have male and you have female on the X axis, and we know just from intersex individuals that you can have individuals that were born with some of both male and female, so you have a sliding scale on the X axis for genitalia. The Y axis going up and down, you have sexual attraction—are you attracted to male or female? Well, once again, we know that could be a sort of a sliding scale, too. So people who are 100 percent only attracted to men, 100 percent only attracted to women, some are like, ‘well, yeah, whatever.’ So you have now, you have a third scale going out this way, a spatial scale Z axis, which is your identity, and up here you have somebody who is the girliest girl in the world and down here you have the manliest man in the world, and then you have all the variance all the way in between. You have some girly guys and some masculine men and then you have some that are displaying both traits and it’s a sliding scale. So it’s this ball. Where do you fit in that ball?

AU: Do you feel like the South as opposed to the non-South might be more discriminatory?

BB: It’s national but it’s more prominent I think in the South. There’s just religion-based conservative values more here. When I was transitioning, I lived in Mississippi. I did live in Mississippi for four year, and that was an experience. Just South of here in Hernando. So I still worked in Memphis. And, yep, right down the road was the Buster Keaton American Legion Lodge that flew the rebel flag and rode all the motorcycles, and you didn’t go by there on Saturday night unless you were one of the good ole boys. So discrimination is real prevalent I think in the South, but it’s nationwide.

AU: you feel safe in your workplace?

BB: Yes. I work for the state university and, yeah, never felt unsafe.
AU: And as a personal trainer?

BB: Yes.

AU: What other issues might you face as transgender?

BB: Well, here’s other things—access to medical care. That’s huge. One of the things I tried to do when I was more active is network physicians and mental health professionals, psychologists to serve transgender community here locally. And that, access to health care for people who are thinking about transitioning need psychological counseling before they begin transitioning, trying to go through the appropriate steps to transition, there’s nothing here. There’s basically almost no network. They have a group here that I haven’t met with that’s the Perpetual Transition group that I’m sure they use, you know, some physicians, but mental health facilities healthcare, there’s not enough networking. And then, once again, if you’re insured through your workplace and for some, whatever reason, you go through everything, and there are insurance companies that will deny your coverage, and if you’re ever diagnosed, if your psychologist diagnoses you with, the classic term is gender identity disorder (GID), then you are diagnosed with a mental illness.

AU: Is that still on the books?

BB: According to the DSM. Yes, it’s still on the books, and something else that we’re trying to get done, groups and not me personally, that are trying to get that de-classified just like years ago being gay was classified as being a mental disorder and it got de-classified. So if you have a diagnoses of GID, you have been diagnosed with a mental illness, and if you go and you fill out life insurance or health insurance or whatever, there’s always a question on there, ‘have you ever been diagnosed with a mental illness? Well, if you lie and say no, and you have been diagnosed with gender identity disorder, then your coverage will be void and you are subject to legal everything from then on out, so just working with the community here and trying to get professionals to try to understand, now, don’t put down gender identity disorder, put down ‘anxiety non-specific origin’ or something global so that transgender doesn’t have mental illness on their chart.

AU: What else would you like to see change?

BB: Help for the transgender community, a hotline. A friend of mine committed suicide. Her family rejected her. She had become HIV positive through being raped. Was lost in hopelessness, no hotline no help. The internet has been a curse and a blessing to a lot of people because for one thing, and I’m one of the first people to say that there needs to be more strict [unintelligible] at people who say they’re trans before you start giving hormones, because with the internet people can go online and if they come into the psychologist, they know what to say, they know how to answer the questions, they know how to get what they want. It’s like a drug person using the appropriate claim with which to get narcotics. They go into there, ‘well, I’ve got this cluster headache, I’m seeing lights. Well, I give them hydrocodyone and this that and the other. So they know how to ask the question and get the drugs and so forth for what they want
without actually being screened properly. Over the period of time, and with the advent of all of the ability for people to go to Thailand and get the surgery without any questions asked, it’s not, it does the transgender community no good as far as the general population. It also paints a negative light.

AU: How has the internet been beneficial?

BB: The internet has been beneficial because you can go on and there are good sites that say, here are some resources, this is what you need to consider, this is how you need to move forward, this is a person who has moved forward, look at their history, their biography, their story. So, it can give you positive hope that, yes, it can be done. For example, if someone went to a site that I had up and said, ‘well, this is how I transitioned, this is where I am now,’ they think, ‘hey, it’s possible.’ And there is hope, and that’s something that’s immeasurable to know that it can be done. You know, everybody’s path is different, but to know that you can find a way. It’s very important and there are resources out there that, when I was transitioning back in the early 2000s there were yahoo groups, there were other places that, of course, there was a lot of trash in there, too, a lot of misinformation, and disinformation, but you had hopefully, you were intelligent enough to figure all that out.

AU: What about your parents?

BB: My parents are deceased. My mother died when I was twenty-two. Well, she had cancer, she got ovarian cancer when I was eighteen, so I never got to be an adult with her, period. She said she wanted to live long enough to see me graduate from college and she did. And then she died.

AU: What was your degree in?

BB: Zoology. I worked at Duke University for a few years. I do pediatric immunology research and then at UT, University of Tennessee Medical Center Department of Pediatrics, and I transitioned while I was working at the Department of Pediatrics. And there were some people in the department who didn’t approve, but didn’t ask for their approval. I had support. The way I approached it, I went to the chairmen of the department and I spoke to them individually to tell them what was going on, what was going to happen, explain the process, and they were very supportive. I hate to say this, but there’s almost a correlation between education and intolerance. The less worldly that somebody is, the less they know about the world in general, about other cultures, about other places, the less traveled that they are in general, the more conservative and more discriminatory that they are. And that’s one reason that the South in general and this area particular is so negative and so discriminatory, because the general population is very uneducated and very poorly traveled. I think that’s why industries don’t relocate to this area because the work force is very undereducated and unskilled.

AU: Do you feel like personal contact also has a pretty big impact on LGBTs as far as those rural, maybe less educated folks who might have animosity, do you think personal contact alleviates that?
BB: Yes and no. I think if they know on the front end that they’re dealing with somebody from the LGBT community, then, no, I don’t think it helps at all because I think that wall, that window is already up and if they know you’re LGBT, then you’re not us, you’re them. I think it’s so hard to get through that wall. Now, on the other hand, if they deal with you on a day to day basis and they find out somewhere down the road that, oh, you’re gay you’re lesbian, you’re transgender, it might make them pause, might help them process it a little bit, ‘Oh, I thought you were just normal.’ There’s that world ‘normal’ again. So I think in that respect it could be either or. I think in general, if they know you’re part of the LGBT community, then that walls are already up and it’s too touchy to knock it down, but it’s like me where I am currently, they don’t know and I don’t advertise. They know I’m living with a woman, so they think, that’s all they think. I don’t advertise. It doesn’t pay. One of the most interesting groups that I was with was a nurse friend of mine inviting me to a gathering of research nurses. I knew her through research and she was a St. Jude researcher. And I went to the presentation of research and so on and so forth and the topic came up of healthcare for gay, lesbian, transgender communities, and there was a doctor from Texas here who had a large clinic somewhere in Texas that dealt with transgender individuals, and the guest lecture presenting his research, at the end of it all, he asked if any of the nurses there had ever had experience with transgenders in the healthcare setting, and I think out of fifty or sixty people there, there was one nurse who said, ‘Yes somebody came in one day to the doctor looking to get on hormones,’ and blah blah blah, and that’s when I stood up and said, ‘Yeah, I’m transgender and I’ve had a lot of experience in the healthcare community,’ and the heads went whop! It was like you heard this audible [makes sound of shock]. So for the next twenty or thirty minutes, I spoke to the group and to the doctor and it was very, very good, and from that I got to meet someone who is now one of the people who does the Tuesday lunches for the LGBT group through the catholic church here. The one over on Central, Immaculate Conception. They have first Tuesday evening supper for the gay and lesbian transgender group. The local bishop is in favor of it.

You know, I told you I was a member of the Episcopal Church, and when I was living in Mississippi, the father who was the head of the church, I came out to him and told him my story and so forth and so on and now he is a deacon here of the west Tennessee diocese, and I’ve been to talk to him here, so he is very well versed in the trans issues. Andy Andrews. St. Mary’s Cathedral on Poplar. He is the Dean of the west Tennessee diocese. Cheryl Cornish, you know her?

AU: Yes, from First Congregational.

BB: It used to be called the ‘gay church.’

AU: Anything else on the policy side?

BB: Gosh. I don’t know. I really don’t know, it’s just it’s so hard to get everything done. It’s just going through, making sure everything is done at the appropriate time, driver’s license, birth certificates, all of that is, you know, difficulty finding medical help is huge. Psychiatric help is huge. Finding, there’s not a listing in the yellow pages for psychology or psychiatry people who have experience dealing with gender identity disorder. That’s one things when I talk to the department of psychology there at UT they brought in Doctor Brown from east Tennessee to lecture to the psychology department on gender identity because there is no formal training in the
medical schools, there is no, and what Dr. Brown is trying to do, he’s trying to go to all the different medical schools he can find and lecture to the psychology departments. These are medical psychologists. I went to Christian Brothers, I know that the person who is head of the psychology department there, and she asked me to come and lecture to the honors psychology groups on gender identity. So I don’t know what PhD psychologists get as far as training on gender identity disorder. I imagine they gloss over it quickly if it’s in the DSM still, but there’s just not a lot of formal time spent on it. And I know you know the statistics that say the numbers of trans individuals and that’s probably only a small part of the reported population.

[End Bates].
Appendix: E
Appendix E: Interview with Michelle Bliss

This is my interview with Michelle Bliss, white bisexual female, instructor of political science at the University of Memphis, and vice chair of the Tennessee Equality Project (TEP). The interview was held at the Starbucks in Olive Branch, Mississippi on September 1, 2011 and lasted about forty-five minutes.

AU: What do you teach at the University of Memphis?

MB: I teach Political Science. I teach political thought, political theory.

AU: How did you get involved with the TEP?

MB: I was actually in law school at the University of Memphis, and I was president of OutLaw which was the GSA (gay-straight alliance) at the University of Memphis law school. And I got invited to a lobbying 101 training that was being put on by TEP and it turned out that Jonathan Cole, who was then the chair of Shelby County, and I went to high school together and so I started getting involved and helping organize events through Outlaw and TEP.

AU: What are some of the goals of TEP in Memphis?

MB: Long term goal, full equality under the law. Short term goal, a non-discrimination ordinance for city employees. We brought it up twice and the first time we withdrew it, not only because we weren’t getting the support that we needed to pass it but, also, we were getting some really nasty commentary from certain members of the Memphis city council. The second time it died on the second reading. Right now we are heavily involved in Memphis city council elections because unless we fill those seats to have our votes, we won’t get the non-discrimination ordinance passed. So that’s the short term goal, is trying to protect city employees. They are being paid with tax dollars that we are all contributing to. There are a large number of LGBT fire men and police people and EMTs, park services, so there are a large number of them who have experienced sexual harassment and they’ve talked to us about it and they are afraid to report it because there’s no recourse for them.

AU: There’s only a broad Shelby county act that’s not specifically…

MB: Shelby County, we did get a resolution passed, so there’s no discrimination for Shelby county employees, they are separate, Memphis city and Shelby county, but Shelby county employees, there’s no discrimination based on non merit factors. So if it’s not something that affects their ability to perform their job, they cannot be discriminated against on the basis of that. We didn’t get the non-discrimination ordinance that we wanted, but our sponsors on the county commission, Steve Mulroy in particular, made sure that the legislative record reflected that this was specifically being introduced to protect LGBT employees. So it’s there, if it ever comes up to a court challenge, it’s in the legislative record.

AU: What are some of the challenges to LGBT-related political activism in Memphis?
**MB:** Ignorance, generally. Discrimination based in religion. And kind of a weird fear of any type of change. It’s a very conservative town. We have challenges, but we have additional challenges in Memphis because we have challenges in the African American community gaining acceptance. It’s sometimes very difficult to outreach to that community because there is a large black church movement that does not support LGBT rights among their own community, so getting involved, and we’ve done a lot to specifically outreach, and have made some progress in the past two years in that area.

**AU:** What kind of outreach have you done involving African American churches?

**MB:** Well, we have several affirming churches in Memphis, and then we also have several LGBT African American pastors, especially female pastors who help us outreach to the community. It’s a tough sell sometimes. Sometimes it’s seen as a white male movement, and it’s not [laughs]. There’s a lot of women involved in the movement, and we do—I think that the college students are much more diverse than perhaps people my age. Yeah, I would say that they are much more diverse. Stonewall Tigers at the University of Memphis, the Rhodes College GSA, it’s a very diverse crowd.

**AU:** My next question was about religious organizations and how they’ve worked to inhibit or advance the movement.

**MB:** Well, I think our biggest opponent is known as the Family Action Council of Tennessee. The Family Action Council of Tennessee is led up by Dave Fowler who was a state senator. He’s an attorney. They utilize the pulpit a lot to get evangelical congregations fired up to call their state reps whenever anything comes up at the state level. In Memphis specifically, we were opposed by Bellevue Baptist church and World Overcomers. World Overcomers is a predominantly African American church. And I literally sat across the table from the pastor of Bellevue Baptist church who was arguing against a non-discrimination ordinance for city employees. They skirt the line of their tax status a lot. But we do have a large number of affirming clergy including Rabbis from reform Jewish groups here in Memphis, we have Catholic priests with us, we have of course First Congo and the Shelby Unitarian are both affirming Congregations in and of themselves that always stand with us. But we have reached out to the faith community to try and show another face because they’ve tired, and Family Action Council have tried to pit it as people of faith versus these godless gay people. So we have to show them, no, actually, we go to church, we have, [laughs],you know, we are in your community, we are your neighbor who keeps their lawn mowed, so there’s a constant battle of education.

**AU:** It’s interesting because, I don’t know if this is common in other southern cities, but Memphis has had some success with the religious outreach.

**MB:** We have, but Jonathan Cole took it on as a project to get members of the community to outreach to their ministers and congregations and to say, you know, ‘we are people of faith, we ask you to stand with us.’ And of course the Episcopalians have been extremely helpful. The Presbyterians in Memphis just split. That might be something you want to look at—PC USA supports gay ordination, but some of the largest Presbyterian churches in Memphis have split
away from it on that basis. So it is divisive. Woodland Presbyterian, which is a moderate sized Presbyterian church, they also have a school, and I actually attended there in Elementary school, and they split off from PC USA, and I sent their pastor an email saying, you know, I’m an alumni in your school and I sat there in your school, in your classes and I can guarantee you there are other children sitting there and what does this tell them? It’s a very divisive issue.

**AU:** How over the past couple of years might the TEP’s strategies have changed?

**MB:** I think we went from being on the defensive to the offensive in the sense that TEP was originally founded in reaction to the adopting of a state-wide marriage amendment, and of course we didn’t get to stop it. It is there. But our focus is on trying to provide protection and less about—we do spend a lot of time fighting bad bills, but we also do more finding sponsors to promote bills that prevent bullying, that help provide resources, that help make avenues available to employees who have been discriminated against. So I think we are more pro-active now, and I think the climate, it’s easier to be proactive now than it was to be ten years ago. I’ll say this, the more vocal the right gets, the more vocal the anti-gay groups get, the more we find the people who may not have a horse in the race, who are in the middle or on the fence, come out and say ‘that’s just not right, you should not be discriminating against people who are doing their jobs or who are, you know, paying their taxes.’ And so they actually kind of help us. The more irrational they are and the more scare tactics they use, the more good people who may not have been motivated start to go, ‘I don’t want to be associated with that,’ so they actually end up helping us.

**AU:** I haven’t recently looked at the status of those bills…

**MB:** HB600 passed, which is the anti-nondiscrimination ordinance, which was put in place to try to repeal Nashville metro’s non-discrimination ordinance. It’s currently being challenged. We are a plaintiff, Tennessee Equality Project is a plaintiff in the court challenge. That court challenge is being headed up by the National Center for Lesbian Rights and a local Tennessee civil rights attorney named Abby Rubenfeld. She also teaches some at Vanderbilt law. And she’s an interesting person that you should talk to if you want to find out about what goes on in the South. So it’s, as far as legislation goes, the senate bill 49, which is the ‘don’t say gay’ bill, according to governor Haslam’s latest comments, it’s dead in the water. Brian Kelsey is the state senator from Knoxville who is pushing it. He’s quite a character. Passed the state senate. It goes back to the house in the spring if I’ve got that correct. We don’t anticipate it passing. Students, gay straight alliances, have come out in droves and parents have said this is just a bad idea, and so it’s one of those things, it raises First Amendment challenges. Our biggest fear is that it handicaps teachers and counselors from being able to help kids who are having problems or being bullied. That scares us the most about it. If a counselor feels that they can’t even discuss it, how are they going to refer them, you know, find out what’s really going on. Is the child being abused at home because of their sexual orientation? Are they being tortured at school? You know, how are they going to address the bullies if they can’t talk about it? So it’s just a huge security issue really for our young people, too.

**AU:** There’s been a history of exclusion within the LGBT movement as in other social movements. Has Memphis taken strides to diversify the movement?
MB: Well, yeah. We were talking about the African American group. There was a long time, especially in the eighties, and probably in the early nineties, in the eighties I was involved in a lot of hospice work with AIDS patients and things. It was seen as a white gay male movement. But what you’ve seen is that while there are plenty of white gay males involved, there are a lot more women, a lot more people of color including from the Latino community, and a lot more straight people, too, involved helping, which is wonderful. We have great allies. Our chair is a straight ally in Shelby County. So it’s really diversified a lot. And I think the perception has changed. There are probably some people who remember the eighties and think that’s that all there is and we have a challenge reaching out to them. But we try to do events that are family friendly, to bring in people who are raising kids and stuff like that. We did an ice cream social. My son loves it. It’s a chance to hang out with his friends and it’s a good chance for kids to see families who are like theirs. And it’s a really good way to bring in people who aren’t really into activism but they want to help, you know, juggling kids and house and two jobs. So we are diversifying in a lot of different ways and trying to reach out to different segments of the population. We are a much more diverse bunch than people think.

AU: What role has race and Memphis’s history of Civil Rights played in your experience with activism in Memphis?

MB: It does create a challenge because Memphis is the cradle of civil rights, even though there are some parallels to be drawn between LGBT fight for right and the civil rights movement, it’s a very touchy thing to talk about. Personally, I prefer to compare it to the suffragette movement. It’s really about gender bias. It’s really about this idea that if you don’t fit the stereotypical mode of what your gender is supposed to be, that you’re somehow less valuable to society. That if you are effeminate if you’re male, that you are somehow weak. And so I take it back to the suffragette movement rather than trying to compare it to civil rights. It is more touchy in Memphis because of the legacy of the death of Martin Luther King. It’s unfortunate, but I think we do walk a fine line in Memphis sometimes about the words that we choose and the way we describe the movement. Personally, I think it’s much more comparable to the suffragette movement.

AU: As far as transgender rights, it seems like people who have maybe warmed up to LGBT rights…there’s still a lot of negativity toward the trans community.

MB: Yeah, the transgender community has had an even harder time just in daily life than the general LGB population. We support a lot of work, we are working right now to bring training to the Memphis police department, that’s another one of our projects, training on sensitivity because there have been incidents, of course, the Duanna Johnson one being the biggest one, but a more recently an incident involving someone who was asked to prove whether they were male or female. It was in Memphis and I can’t give you more details at this point, but it was just the problem is that especially for the transgender community, they are unable to change their birth certificate if they were born in the state of Tennessee. And you think about that. What If your birth certificate had you down as male and you’ve been living for twenty years as a woman and you can’t change that. It’s on your driver’s license. You can change your passport, state department did change those rules, but it’s on your driver’s license, every state document that
requires a birth certificate. And so that’s a law that Beverly Marerro, state senator Beverly Marrero and House Representative Jeanne Richardson, both from Memphis, have worked on to try and get that birth certificate change allowed, to get that law changed. The transgender community in Memphis suffers a higher amount of violence, more unemployment, it’s very difficult because whereas gay people can often be in the closet, it can be a lot more difficult if your transgender to pass successfully, especially when your driver’s license gives you away every time and your I.D. papers do. It can be very, very difficult. And trouble with access to healthcare as well. That’s an issue that we are looking at and will be addressing. Most major hospitals now have some sort of non-discrimination policy in place, but sometimes you still have to fight on an individual level to get that recognized. Visitation is allowed now, it’s actually at the federal level now. Health and Human Services put down those guidelines under family members of choice to be on your visitation list. I would say to you to check out the Equality Federation (EF). The Equality Federation is an umbrella that different state organizations belong to. It allows us some advantages such as purchasing software or constant contact that we use to send out emails and things like that, software for managing our databases, and the EF also does training for local organizations helping to set up, setting up a 501C4 which is a lobbying branch or a 501C3 which is the foundation branch. TEP actually has three organizations under our umbrella. We have a foundation, which is a 501C3 which means donations are tax deductible, they focus on education. I’m on the board of the C4, which is the lobbying branch, donations are not tax deductible though we are non-profit, and then I’m also on the board of our PAC which, our Public Action Committee does endorse candidates, which we just did our endorsements for Shelby County’s city council race.

AU: How might the Memphis movement be unique in comparison to other southern cities?

MB: I don’t know that we are unique. I think we face, although I will have to say that religion, race, and politics are so intertwined here, probably more so than Atlanta, although I can’t say that definitively, it feels like they are more intertwined here, and the state of Tennessee as a whole being very right leaning, a very strong presence in the evangelical movement of course with the Southern Baptist Convention and Lifeway being the publisher for all the evangelical materials in Nashville. I think that we have probably more organized opposition and so we have to be more organized, more proactive. But I think the struggle is the same everywhere. It’s the struggle to be seen and it’s a struggle to be seen as people and not as ‘that gay person.’ Or as my neighbor, my co-worker, and accepted for that. I don’t know that it’s unique. But I think it’s probably a good example.

AU: I was thinking of Atlanta. It’s always been conservative but they try to keep up a really progressive image

MB: Yes, and Nashville is more progressive as Memphis as well. And some of that is I think entrenched Old South thinking. You know, we are on the border of Arkansas and Mississippi. We are surrounded by rural counties. Which, so is Nashville, but Nashville has positioned itself differently and there’s also a large art scene, which even though it’s country music, you are talking about people who are artistic and progressive and probably more familiar or more comfortable around people of other sexual orientations and gender persuasions.
AU: Little Rock is sort of comparable. It’s Mid-South. I don’t think there is a gay and les
community center there..

MB: As far as I know there’s not. Fayetteville is actually the seat of a lot of LGBT activity there.
Laura Phillips, are you familiar with Will Philips? It’s the young man who refused to say the
pledge at his school because not everybody’s equal. That’s his mom and she’s in Fayetteville.
She’s on facebook. You should get to know her. She works with Get Equal over there a lot. Get
Equal is probably active. Will is a brilliant child. I met him at the Pride here in Memphis last
year. And, young man, he’s actually a pre-teen now, but he’s got extraordinary parents. They are
very committed to diversity and equality and he reflects that.

AU: Oh yeah! I think I saw that about him on the Colbert Report.

MB: That’s the thing. There are progressives in every small town everywhere. There are people
who don’t go with the status quo. And part of our challenge, and part of every equality
organization’s challenge, is getting them involved. Because you have to shake them out of their
comfort zone sometimes—‘Well, yeah, I’m gay and in a small town, but everybody knows me
and my family, so no one bothers me.’ Well, the guy in the next town may not be so lucky. But
that’s the kind of thing that’s always a challenge. I think that’s all over the South.

AU: Do you have anything to add?

MB: I’m looking forward to seeing where TEP will go over the next few years. With the end of
Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, and potentially the end of DOMA for the next few years, once DOMA
goes by the wayside, it will, hopefully, if it’s done properly, get rid of all these little mini
DOMAs at the state level, which is going to be fascinating. And I envision a whole new set of
battles at that point I think. There are some battles, I’m sure, that will be fought that I can’t even
imagine yet because DOMA changed the landscape of the nineties, and the repeal of DOMA will
change the landscape of the next decade, but there’s always going to be people who are
prejudiced and bigoted and you are always going to have to stand up for people who can’t stand
up for themselves or who need a helping hand to stand up for themselves. I don’t see us going
away, although my ultimate goal would be for us to be completely irrelevant, and for us to be
able to quit doing this and just lead our lives.

[End Bliss].
Appendix: F
Appendix F: Interview with Reverend Cheryl Cornish

The interview with Rev. Cheryl Cornish was conducted in her office at First Congregational United Church of Christ on November 30, 2011 and lasted about forty-five minutes.

AU: How long have you been in the ministry?

CC: I was ordained in 1983, so however long that is, twenty-something years.

AU: How did First Congregational get started?

CC: You mean originally, its history? It started when the union army took over Memphis. The chaplain of the Union army was a Congregationalist. And so they actually took a building that belonged to Presbyterians and started a church for soldiers, the Union army soldiers and then that eventually became Strangers’ Church and that evolved into our church, so our origins are with the Civil War.

AU: How did it come to be a gay friendly church?

CC: That’s a big question. Our denomination, the United Church of Christ, it’s, the way decisions are made are at different levels so it’s not like the national church decides for the local church. It doesn’t quite work that way, every congregation has autonomy over itself but at the national level, the United Church of Christ has been GLBT friendly for years, and we are the first denomination to ordain a gay man, I want to say back in the sixties, Bill Johnson. So we have that heritage as a denomination and then what happens is these local churches are invited to affirm them as part of their ministry and its part of a movement called the Open and Affirming movement. That’s the same as other denominations like the “Greater Light” churches or, there are different names for that, reconciling congregations. So any way, that has been a part of our denomination’s life for years. We became an Open and Affirming church in 1991 and so we’ve been doing this almost twenty years and we were the sixtieth church in our denomination to become an Open and Affirming church. So, and we went through a process, a congregational vote decision dialogue about doing that.

AU: How important is it that these issues are entering the public consciousness of churches?

CC: Well, I don’t want to minimize this, but we’re kind of over it. We’ve been doing it for twenty years. And just in terms of our congregational life, it’s kind of an old issue. I mean, I can’t even tell you what percentage of our congregation is gay or straight. We went through a period when we went through some self consciousness about that, ‘are we getting too gay?’ or ‘are we making sure that gay folks are officers of the church and have committees?’ and all that. When we passed this, of course we didn’t know of any other precedent in the city for doing it. You know, back in ‘91 this was a much more vulnerable, risky thing. Of course, we were heading right into the AIDS pandemic here in Memphis and so really without knowing it we were stepping into that whole issue, and so the nineties were a very challenging decade for us. I mean, we felt very ostracized by the churches in the community, you know, there was, we would get hate calls, bomb threats, we were, you know, harassed in some respects. We had a gay man
who was our associate pastor who came on staff, too, and so that really helped our presence and understanding and outreach within the wider community, but for us it was really initially a decision for spiritual justice. I mean, it didn’t have much to do with, you know, gay rights, per say, it was sort of—how do we care for the people God has sent us? And this is one way to do that, and anyway, so, by this stage of the game we’ve been doing same sex union services, and so we’re kind of at the point with new staff, we don’t even ask whether they’re gay or straight. It’s just kind of a, you know, we are twenty years into this now, so when other churches are discussing whether they should do it or not it’s kind of like, ‘Wow.’ I’m just sorry it continues to be such a discussion point. It just feels real old.

AU: The affirming distinction here, did that also kind of come out of the needs of the church?

CC: The real thing to push the envelope in terms of us becoming an ONA (Open and Affirming) church in 1991, we were really a church about ready to close its doors. Our membership was small and older and it was kind of a dying church, so when I came in ‘88 we started to get some new growth mainly among women, and I think that was more because they wanted a woman pastor than anything to do with same sex relationships, but then one of those couples, actually two of the couples were lesbian, and in one church, they had been asked to leave their Presbyterian church because they were gay, and so they were feeling that issue very acutely. And so in another case one of the women had terminal cancer and they wanted to have a service of union. I’m a new pastor and they’re saying, ‘can we have a service of union?’ and it pushed me at that stage of the game, I thought, well, it’s perfectly fine with me but I don’t want to be in this position where it’s like, ‘well, we’ll do it privately if you’re a lesbian but we can do it in the church building if you’re not,’ and I didn’t exactly feel free doing a service like that in the church without at least some dialogue, and so that’s what really pushed us to go into this ONA process. Then it was kind of inevitable given that we have made this statement, and not really screamed it out loudly but word of mouth in the Memphis community is pretty significant thing, and I think more word started spreading within the lesbian and gay community that we were an open church, and so that’s where we started really pulling new members and new involvement and then inevitably since some of the, really it was men at that time had HIV/AIDS, at that time that really felt like a death sentence, you know, that became a pretty serious involvement for us. And that moved us more into dealing with the gay community in Memphis.

AU: What role did First Congregational play in promoting a city ordinance?

CC: We were delighted to work in partnership with the Tennessee Equality Project (TEP), and so one of the things that we can offer very easily because it’s not controversial and we can give a quick ‘yes’ is we hosted one of the first big rallies for that. And we felt very, very pleased because it was one of the largest rallies for gay and lesbians rights that I’ve ever seen in Memphis, and that was the one when they were encouraging people to ‘call in gay’ to the city council. ‘I’m gay and I vote, I’m calling in gay today. So we could offer our space, the front steps of the building and our choir sang and a lot of our members were there, so what we really offered was constituency and space. But the main organization with that, and I guess I spoke at the hearing and I think Sonya did, too, our associate pastor, but that was really organized very much by the TEP. We just stepped in and helped as they were asking us to do things.
AU: Churches are pretty segregated in the South, and maybe nationally. How has first Congregational broken down some of those barriers?

CC: Well, it's been kind of slow persistent work because it is hard. I think, let me get my statistics right, I could of told you, think a month ago, and now I'm getting fuzzy brained, if you have, I think this is the way, you are defined as a multicultural church if only eighty-five percent of one group, whether that be black or white or Asian, whatever, so an eighty-five percent one group, it defines you as multicultural, and I think the statistics are less than five percent of churches in America. So I mean that just starts giving you an image of how much that's an issue, for a lot of different reasons, I think, but how much that's an issue. So we are just now moving into being a multicultural church. We have about fifteen percent black worshippers at our worship service. And some of that has been staffing, some of that has been worship style, intentional. Some of that has been outreach, and our location in a racially mixed neighborhood, I think all those factors work together to make that happen. You know, sometimes diversity issues are difficult. It sometimes can be that if you deal with the racial integration it's harder to deal with the gender issues and that integration. People will want to racially integrate a church but they won't want a church with gay people. Or they want a gay friendly church but they don't care so much about the ratio and [unintelligible] the gospel music. And so trying to crack all those barriers is a little bit tough. So we were, for about twenty years, we've been very focused on gender equality in terms of inclusion of women and then sexual orientation equality in terms of the gay and lesbian community, so I would say it's been the last five years we started getting more racially diverse. And it's been that combination. We have three African American folks on staff, and we work pretty intentionally to encourage racial diversity.

AU: In some if my interviews I've heard the African American church tends to be less open for LGBT rights. Have you witnessed this? Have you worked with any other African American churches?

CC: Yes, I just think these issues are complicated church to church. You know, sexuality in the black community has just a whole different history, a whole different legacy, and, you know, when you look at the sexual abuse that was slavery and how that's extended through the years and what's that done to family structures and all that, I feel the need to go very gently in terms of pointing fingers at the black church about these issues. I think these issues live differently in their communities. And in their history, so yes, I mean, we've had dialogue in particular with one African American church on this topic and I think there's opening there, but maybe not the ability there, at least among that church, to make a dive in and say, 'Oh we're Open and Affirming' or 'we're Greater Light' or 'we're welcoming to gay people,' but I think there are plenty of predominantly black churches that will allow participation. I don't know, I'm not really in a great place to speak on that.

AU: What church did you work with?

CC: I don't want to disclose that information at this time.

AU: Has AIDS work helped bridge any sort of gap between this church and the African American community?
CC: Yes, I think that because, especially, maybe a decade ago, AIDS really became much more of an African American disease for men and for women, I mean, it’s not exclusively that, but it really devastated the black community, so yes. There have been different efforts, you know, Friends For Life (Memphis AIDS organization) works very hard to bring folks together over racial lines, to bring people together. So, yes, I would say that’s true, less so, maybe, than the beginning of the pandemic than now.

AU: How might attitudes have changed both inside the church and in Memphis at large since you’ve been here?

CC: Well, I’ll be offering a twenty years perspective. Certainly within the church I think for us it’s been a wonderful experience to name that welcome and to live into it, and at times it’s been a little hard to be against the grain of the wider Memphis community, but what our church members have found is that folks who are initially nervous thinking, ‘oh we don’t want this label of being a gay church,’ have realized the importance of a church defining itself as welcoming strangers, and friendships have formed and loyalties have formed. You know, what happens is heterosexual people start owning or feeling the bigotry because it’s their friends that are being talked about or their church that is being talked about. And so I think that solidarity has been a very good and important thing. It is not a controversial issue in the church in the least. I mean, people join the church knowing that it’s that kind of community and that’s a positive thing for them. So I think that’s good. I see definitely way more acceptance in the religious community. Maybe not at a formalized level but certainly in terms of the way churches are operating and there’s much greater understanding of that. You know, not everybody’s there yet clearly. But, you know, I think it’s definitely in a much better place than it was. I think younger people are absolutely sick of our discussion of the issue. I think it just seems like an old, passé issue and, you know, finally, if churches are going to grow, they just have got to move on on this. There’s a book called *Unchristian*, the author is Kinnaman, and I can’t remember who else, but they took a survey of younger folks, maybe like eighteen to twenty-five, and it was something like in the ninety percentiles that younger folks said one of the reasons they didn’t want to go to church was because of the bigotry on this issue that they perceived coming from churches. And, you know, churches, if not for their own sense of morality or theology or faith or whatever, I think just in terms of being viable for a whole new generation of people who just have not grown up with this stuff around this, they’re going to have to open their doors just to be vital in the next decades. We work in pre-active partnership with the Gay and Lesbian Community Center and Friends for Life, we have always participated in the gay pride parade, and we’re very willing to host events or have our space used. We do advocacy with one other church in our denomination, Holy Trinity Church of Christ really formed out of gay theology and membership, and we’ve worked with Holy Trinity, they’re part of our denomination, so there’s that connection, too.

AU: Friends for Life is the AIDS outreach, and you have MAGY, and what other..?

CC: The Gay and Lesbian Community Center, Friends for Life, the positive living center for a time was in our building and then they got new space and moved, and then the Gay and Lesbian Center is down the street. So we’re active in gay advocacy, secular gay advocacy groups, very much so, but, you know, we’ve got our own stuff as a religious organization, I mean, there’s
certain things that we’re doing, that we’re concerned about. We are concerned about worship and we’re concerned about hunger and poverty and this is one of many ways that we live our faith, but we’re always happy to partner with these other groups.

AU: Do you have anything else to add?

CC: I, the focus of your paper is just looking at how churches have been part of the wider secular movement?

AU: Yes, and, you know, it doesn’t have to be political or anything like that, just how it’s been a space for LGBTs…

CC: One thing to be conscious of, I mean, I think sometimes folks don’t think about this maybe as much as it factors. In churches, part of what all these fights about ordination, whether it’s ordination of women, ordination of gay people, you know, a lot of times the fight over gay rights takes place over ordination, right, and, you know, part of what’s happening in a church is your sort of modeling, ‘what does a perfect human being look like?’, you know, not saying any of us is perfect, but, ‘what does a whole human being, what are we supposed to be?’ Those are the kinds of questions that really live in your religious life, your spiritual life. And so part of that, part of the issue of the inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender folks in a religious community is really modeling that to be gay is not just a person who sins but we accept them anyway, that it can be an affirmative human way to be. It can be the way God wants us to be. And so that’s often the crux of these fights, is who embodies a whole human being, so that’s why, I’m sure you’ve read doctrines about women being misbegotten males and some of that kind of stuff and just whole attitudes on sexuality and how that plays out. That’s why these issues in churches become important. They are very symbolic, but you really can’t change the political world until you start also changing the symbolic world. So it really does change your sense of who has authority, who has power who has righteousness, who has voice. That’s where I feel the church contribution is especially significant. It starts changing peoples’ consciousness on who matters, who’s human, who can embody God, you know, who’s Godly, so that’s probably the issue, you know, what kinds of families are acceptable, you know, can two fathers raise a family and can that be a righteous, Godly home, is that a home like it ought to be. Church models what it ought to be. And so, if you have not changed that in peoples’ thinking, it’s going to be very hard to make some of these other changes, and so that’s a big part of what we are doing in a church.

AU: So this place is very important in having these conversations and in starting to change views—

CC: And images are formed. Mary Daly, a famous feminist theologian, made the statement, ‘When God is male, males are Gods,’ and that also plays for sexuality. If only a heterosexual person is able to be seen as a Godly person or a righteous person or living the life god created them to live, then gay people are always going to be a little bit defective, a little bit off to the side, not fully human. So those understandings of what a good human being [laughs] or whole human being, however you want to look at that, is about, those are important symbols. And for children growing up, for example, if they have same-sex parents, to see their family as not
abnormal, maybe not majority, but not abnormal, really starts changing the consciousness of the
kids, and they all start playing into the legal structures—who can have custody of children?
Whose families are OK? Who can parent, who has rights who has spousal rights, that kind of
stuff, it starts bleeding into all those kinds of legal covenants and, you know, then into the
political realm. So that’s kind of the main work I think that we do in churches. That is kind of
our unique work, you know, is that symbolic work.

[End Cornish].
Appendix: G
Appendix G: Interview with Reverend Paul Eknes-Tucker

This is my interview with Rev. Paul Ecknes-Tucker, pastor of Holy Trinity Community Church. The interview was about thirty minutes long and conducted on January 4, 2012 in Ecknes-Tucker’s office at Holy Trinity.

AU: Could you tell me a little bit about how Holy Trinity got started?

PET: Holy Trinity was born out of the GLBT experience of not being welcomed into other congregations. So it got together a few folks who just wanted to have a worshipping church experience. Started—I’ve only been here fairly recently—in 1990, so it started as an independent group, it had some relationship to other congregations, primarily MCCs, Metropolitan Community Churches, and then it affiliated with the United Church of Christ in 2005, I believe. And so it’s been a part of the UCC since then, but it’s always, even though the congregation is very mixed as far as gay and straight and that kind of thing, it’s always been pretty much a part of this identity as being the place where the LGBT community is welcomed and embraced.

AU: How long have you been in the ministry?

PET: Thirty-four years. I started out in the Methodist church—I came out in the Methodist church—I’m a gay man in case you didn’t know—and I found Metropolitan Community Churches not long after that, and have been an MCC pastor for most of my career before coming here. I’ve been here since September (2011).

AU: Where are you from?

PET: Well, I’m originally from Alabama. I grew up in Birmingham, but I’ve served churches all over the U.S., most recently Minneapolis. So I was there ten years, and before that, Dallas for twelve years. So coming back to the south is kind of like coming home.

AU: Do you see a difference as far as integration of LGBTs in the South compared with other places you’ve lived?

PET: Oh yes it’s always different in parts like Minnesota which has legal protections for GLBT folks that are much greater than places like the south and where people are much more integrated into the fabric of community as just a part of it, so it is interesting to be back in the South again where you have to take a step back and go, “OK, this is not quite the same, although I’ve found Memphis to be a great place to be. This congregation is very mixed racially as well as sexual orientation wise, and I think that’s just a great experience to be a part of because, you know, eleven O’ clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week, and that’s not true here, so it’s really been a nice experience to be able to model for other people.

AU: How did the Open and Affirming distinction come about?

PET: It was really the church wanting to be transparent about who they were, and that’s what Open and Affirming is all about—being open about being inclusive.

AU: How was coming out in the Methodist church?
PET: I came out in 1977, so a long time ago...Birmingham. I was in college at the time, so it was a different world and there were no Open and Affirming congregations then. Actually, MCC just started in Birmingham that year I later found out, and so it was very pivotal in my coming out process because it really helped me with the final piece of my coming out process, which was around my spirituality because I’d known I was gay from the earliest time and I didn’t always know the word for it, just different. So as a teenager finding out that somehow my sexuality might make me unliked by God was kind of a startling revelation, because that never occurred to me until then. My family struggled with it for a long time. They are wonderful now. And we have a great relationship, but it was probably about a good fifteen year process for us to kind of work through all the steps, figure out exactly what it meant and what it didn’t mean. It just took them a little while to get used to they had never had to do this before.

AU: Has Holy Trinity worked with other LGBT organizations, like for instance the city ordinance, promoting a city ordinance, anything directly related to activism?

PET: Yeah, a lot of the things that have started here in Memphis have some ties to this congregation. Pride for example, the yearly Pride celebration, their offices are here, so this congregation has been very active in the formation of these other events, activities that happen that kind of raise awareness in Memphis. We have a strong partnership with the Gay and Lesbian Community Center, as well as working with other congregations. This congregation has helped form two other churches—one in Nashville and one in Jackson, Mississippi, two places that also needed Open and Affirming congregations, so this congregation has a really good history of being the face of the gay community when often times there wasn’t others, and so I’m really proud of what they’ve accomplished here in their twenty years history.

AU: How important is it to start these changes in a mixed congregation—start that in the church, does it seem to seep out into the community in securing straight allies and kind of spreading that…

PET: Well, it is an ongoing societal transition. The more that people become aware that gay people are not odd, they’re just different, they’re not evil, they’re just different, they’re not sinful, they’re just different, that’s a whole growing awareness for our culture. So the fact that this congregation exists and has a sign on a busy street and works with other organizations and is in the newspaper occasionally, on TV occasionally, I think that helps to just kind of get that consciousness that is a precursor for any change or awareness in the community. More and more people will discover that the things we fear about people who are different are simply that we fear difference. There’s so much about us that we have more in common than we have not in common. So it is a long process. It might not occur all in my lifetime, but it’s an exciting thing to be a part of making it happen.

AU: It must seem like a pretty old discussion when you hear other churches deciding whether or not to ordain gay and lesbian ministers.

PET: It’s really kind of like, ‘Oh, please’ [laughs]. Especially, it’s so funny to put it into historical perspective because you hear the exact same arguments being used that were used for women being included in ordination, for black people being included in society, it’s the exact
same thing—’this isn’t how God expects’ or ‘this isn’t the way church is done.’ And it’s like, when do wake up and say we’re just perpetuating the same kinds of things with just a different group? So what we don’t learn we’re destined to repeat in history.

AU: It’s interesting in Memphis because there’s so much religious opposition, but also a movement of churches in support of LGBT rights…

PET: Yeah, it’s an interesting dynamic in a place like Memphis which has such deep roots in the Civil Rights Movement, such painful roots in the Civil Rights Movement, and for people to, some people get that corollary, of how when you oppress a minority, any minority, you’re dealing with fear, not with reality, and yet you see sometimes some of the staunchest resistance coming from African American congregations. So it’s like, yeah, how do we not connect the dots on these things? [Laughs]. But it just goes to show that it’s more resistance to change more, resistance to new information than it is really to reality. We all resist change. No matter who we are. So it’s just a process of raising awareness, educating, getting a public face, helping people to see for themselves.

AU: You mentioned the African American community as sometimes more seemingly homophobic and also the LGBT community is often portrayed as white, but Holy Trinity and First Congregational work to create diverse congregations…

PET: Yeah, because once you discover you don’t have to be afraid of each other you can discover ways we can work with each other. And it’s truly amazing when we start honoring the gifts from all parts of the community who would like to share their gifts in the community. So, yeah, you see some ancient fears and ancient prejudice and phobias but it can be overcome by the grace of God I think.

AU: What sort of changes have you seen in the thirty-five years that you’ve been in the ministry?

PET: Certainly there is—I do believe history bends towards justice, and I have seen that slow bending arch just in my lifetime. It’s always much slower than I want it to be, but it’s persistent. Much of what we see in the contemporary political situation in terms of the reactionary kinds of things we see from conservative politicians and leaders often is that fear based hysteria about, ‘if we allow this to happen it’s a slippery slope to du du du dudu.’ It’s always, ‘this may be almost OK, but it’s going to lead to all this other stuff. That’s always the fear mongering of resistance, that any change will make everything change. Maybe it won’t, but when you have, when you have right on your side, and I believe that justice is always right, providing justice to everybody, providing equality is for everybody and you have that on your side, then you know that all this resistance to change is eventually going to subside. I just hope to be able to see some more of it.

[End Ecknes-Tucker].
Appendix: H
Appendix H: Interview with AJ Flores

This is the interview with AJ Flores, twenty-six year old black stud and pest control technician of Memphis. She also leads a group at the MGLCC for minority women called Studs With a Profound Purpose (SWAPP). The interview was conducted at the MGLCC on January 19, 2012 and lasted approximately one hour.

AU: How old are you?

AF: twenty-six.

AU: What do you do here in Memphis?

AF: I am a pest control technician. Been doing that for about five years. I was born in Hawaii. Moved here, my mother married, my step father, his family was from here, or his family is from here, and he was in the military. He was stationed in Hawaii at the time and we pretty much came kicking and screaming. But I’ve been here twenty years now. I guess I would be considered a local.

AU: Could you tell me about coming out?

AF: I’ve been actively gay since I was twelve. My coming out, I think I was sixteen, I was on the phone with my mother and I said, ‘I have something to tell you,’ she said, ‘Well, what is it?’ I said, ‘I think I’m gay.’ And before then I’d have boyfriends and even after I came out I’d have boyfriends because it just was frowned upon when I was growing up as it is now, and she told me she already knew and it really wasn’t a, she’s been real supportive of me throughout these years. It’s been a long time and she accepts anybody that I bring home as long as they’re good to me. She accepts me being the dominant woman, stud, that’s what we call it in the South. She accepts me as long as I’m happy and I’m not hurting anybody. She’s pretty happy about it. My stepfather on the other hand, since him and my mom divorced, I haven’t talked to him at all. I remember I got into a situation where my ex-girlfriend had put me out before my birthday. I called him because my mother moved back to Hawaii. I called him and said, ‘I need somewhere to stay,’ and mind you, he has a three bedroom house and it’s just him and his girlfriend living there. He told me he didn’t have room. You know, so, he’s not real accepting of it. My biological father isn’t either. Him and I have gotten into a couple of altercations about it. He just doesn’t feel like it’s right, and the way I put it, I’m grown, I pay my own bills, I’m not hurting anybody, so it shouldn’t matter what I do. You know, you’re not the one to judge me. So my coming out, it wasn’t as dramatic as most peoples.

AU: Do you have any siblings?

AF: I have two sisters and a brother. I’m the oldest. They all accept it. I’m just, to them, as my transition from feminine to dominant occurred, I’m more like their big brother than their big sister now. I still consider myself a woman, I never consider myself as a man or want to go through the whole transgender things. But they’re very supportive of it they accept me for who I am.
AU: So at one point you were feminine identified? Could you talk about that?

AF: When I was in high school I was feminine. I had a couple of boyfriends, never actually had sex with a guy, it almost happened [laughs] but that’s a whole nother story. I was feminine, you know, like you are, and then when I got to college, my best friend, I met her, and she was dominant, she was a stud. She knew I was gay and initially I thought she wanted to get with me but she was totally not my type because I was into feminine women. Well, a situation happened where the roommate I did have and I got into an altercation, so I had to find a new roommate, and it just so happened that my best friend now, she was in a room by herself. So I became her roommate and I asked her one day to teach me how to be like she is, more dominant. And as my transition went on, it just, I just feel more comfortable the way that I am, the way that I dress, I don’t have anything feminine in my closet. I don’t wear any kind of makeup, I’m just, you know, I’m dominant. I consider myself eighty-five percent more masculine than I do feminine. That’s how I identify.

AU: What made you want to be like your best friend?

AF: I wasn’t comfortable in my own skin at the time being feminine because men would still hit on me, and they still do to this day, but I just wasn’t—I knew I was a lesbian, I knew I loved women, and I was uncomfortable with wearing push up bras and skirts and things of that nature. I wasn’t comfortable like that. And as I started to get more into becoming more dominant, I just, this is who I am, this is who I was supposed to be. I actually, this is a hormone imbalance [points to chin], I grow, just shaved it off the other day, but I grow a beard without taking any kind of pills, not a full beard, but it looks like a beard, mustache. You know, I just feel comfortable who I am now.

AU: When did you discover this?

AF: To give you an exact date would be hard, it was, you know what this is 2012, I would say, because in transitioning from feminine to stud, I still had long hair and instead of just, at first I would flat iron it because my hair is naturally curly and I would flat iron it and wear it down. When I started to transition into a stud I would get my hair braided, and I don’t know if you’ve noticed or if you’ve seen studs out here, most studs that don’t have their hair cut off they either have dreads or they have their hair braided, and I would wear mine braided, and one day I had my hair braided and I said, ‘I’m just gonna cut this shit off.’ And I did. I cut it all off. And I believe that was the day, I’ve had my hair cut for about eight years now. So I guess about eight years ago it just became who I am, this who I’m going to be. This is who I’m going to be when they put me in the ground. This is it. And you know I have friends that, even my friend now that taught me how to be who I am, pushed me into that direction, she’s kind of, she’s struggling with her sexuality where she is noticing men more than she used to. And she’s still my friend, she’s going to be my friend on matter what she does. She can have sex with monkeys and I’m still going to, you know, I’m still going to be her friend. But that will never be me. I will always be with a woman.

AU: Can you talk about your group, SWAPP?
AJ: SWAPP is a Studs With a Profound Purpose. I came up with the idea from a TV show, actually, called House of Paine. I won’t make it long and drawn out about that, but to make it short, this particular episode, the father of the show, he had just retired, early retirement, and he went to, involuntarily actually, he went to a support group, but for men. And when he was sitting in the support group, as I was watching the show, he was sitting in the support group and everybody around him was sharing things about themselves, it was a depression group for men, and everybody was sharing things about themselves, and he just kind seemed like he didn’t want to, he was real withdrawn, and then once somebody got him to speak up about what was wrong with him, it was like a light bulb went off in my head. African American and minority dominant women, we don’t really deal with each other on a regular basis, and we don’t have groups where we can just be ourselves, where everybody around us understands what’s going on. Because we carry a lot of weight on our shoulders in our families. We are the rock of our community, I think anyway. We pretty much hold the same stature that a man does in a heterosexual relationship and heterosexual life, and we needed this group, we don’t have many members rights now, we haven’t done s much foot work as we should have, but the people that have come have learned things and been active I think since August or September, so just a few months, that have come, they get something from it, you know, they are allowed to release whatever tension and drama they have in their lives because they can’t discuss with anyone else, or if they were to discuss it with anybody else, they may not understand what’s going on. So it’s just a support group for us and for us to be active in our community because we are really not. Minorities, African Americans, we are not active in our community at all.

AU: So it’s a group for African American women?

AF: It’s a group for everybody. It’s a group for everybody, but that’s who have come so far. But once we start putting the foot work in, more will come, and that’s definitely, there is definitely a diving line between black and white. And you’d think that in the community that we’re in, the life that we live, that their wouldn’t be a diving line, but there is. We are all trying to fight that same battle for equality and still we are so divided. You know, I don’t know if it’s just always going to be that way, I hope it’s not, but it is for right now.

AU: What kind of divisions exist there?

AF: I think that blacks and whites in particular don’t really think they have much in common. In our community, anyway, they don’t really think they have much in common. What you’ll see a black woman do, or a black stud do, you might not see a white stud or white woman do. I think it still goes back to there being an overall division between black and white period all over the world, and it stems from that. And if everybody could get that into their heads in our community, if everyone would get that into their heads that we are fighting for the same thing and we are reaching for the same goal, we want the same, we want the same thing, then there won’t be such a division. If we see that we do have so many things in common, the only difference is the color of our skin, and we bleed the same, I put my pants on the same way you do, I put my shirt on the same way you do, my skin color is the only thing that’s different. If they get that through their heads then one day we will come together.
AU: Do you feel like you may have experienced more discrimination as an African American lesbian?

AF: I think it just depends on the situation. If you put a white stud and a black stud together and put them in the same situation, as far as going for the same job, let’s say we have our hair cut the same, we are dressed the same, we have the exact same outfit on, there will be the same discrimination...because people are so closed minded, and when I say people I mean just the general population, people are so closed minded to what homosexuality is, the fact that we still live very normal lives, we wake up, we go to work every day, we have family, we have friends, we have problems, if they stop thinking that, if they stop throwing stones at us they will see us different and maybe we will see ourselves different because there’s a lot of self hate I this community. A lot of people kill themselves because of what other people think and how other people feel about us. For a long time I didn’t think about those things, I just was kind of like real tunnel vision. And now that I’ve started this group, the shades have come off and I see everything just a little more clearer than I did yesterday. I think that if we see ourselves as the same, and when I say ourselves I mean black and white, if we start to see ourselves as the same then other people will see ourselves as the same. There won’t be room for discrimination if we’re together, you can’t, no one can defeat you if you’re together. If you’ve ever played that game red rover red rover, you know, if you’re clinked together it’s so hard for somebody to bust through. And it’s pretty much the same thing in this situation. We just really need to come together, and it’s just so sad because, I’m not a very religious person, but I’m a very spiritual person, and God put us all here for a reason, and a lot of times we try to find out what that reason is, and I strongly believe that it’s for us to be a blessing to others, not for us to throw stones or hate or see what the difference, and there really is no difference. He made us all in his own liking and people look past that and they don’t think about that and they forget it.

AU: Were you raised in a religious household?

AF: Not at all. I mean, when we first came to Memphis we would go to church every Sunday, but my mother’s not real religious. She’s spiritual, but she’s not real religious. There’s definitely a diving line between the two. Religion is, to me, from my experience, ‘holier than thou.’ You want to throw the bible at everything, and spiritual is I just, believe in God, and I know that he believes in me and what my heart is. Not who I lay with.

AU: What church denomination did you attend growing up?

AF: C.O.G.I.C. Church of God in Christ.

AU: Would you say that’s had some influence on, did you ever hear preaching against homosexuality, or did it have any role in shaping your identity?

AF: I honestly don’t remember because I was so young. I wouldn’t really call myself, you know how they say children are impressionable? I wouldn’t really say that I was impressionable, and still not. I don’t remember if they ever spoke of things like that. But I know that as I’ve grown up I know that the C.O.G.I.C. church, they frown upon gays, lesbians, trans, bi, anything that’s not, it’s almost like a cult, you know, anything that’s not of that structure, it’s frowned upon.
C.O.G.I.C. people and, I try to stay away from them. I respect who they are because everyone has their own opinion and everyone is entitled to them, but I don’t have to make it a part of my life. Just like you don’t have to make what I do a part of your life.

**AU:** Do you feel like those kind of views have shaped the African American community?

**AJ:** You mean the C.O.G.I.C? The black community period?

**AU:** Have you ever experienced discrimination from the African American community? I haven’t, I can’t say that I’ve personally experienced any discrimination from the black community because, not to toot my own horn, but I pride myself on being very charismatic and, you know who I am, what I look like on the outside is not who I am on the inside. And if I meet someone, they’re going to love me anyway, regardless of whether they know I’m gay or not or whether they agree with it or not. So I haven’t personally experienced any discrimination from the black community.

**AU:** Have you ever been to Black Gay Pride?

**AF:** Yes, several years ago when I was younger. Were you going ask a question about that because I was just going to go on [laughs].

**AU:** [laughs] No, that’s good.

**AF:** It’s crap. It’s crap. We are so stuck in, we are so stuck in drinking, having random sex, getting high, we are so stuck in the negative aspect—not the negative—but just one side of this life or any life that you live. It’s redundant. You know, they do the same thing every year, every year, every year, and they never—Black Gay Pride in Memphis anyway—because I’ve never been to any other black gay pride, but Black Gay Pride in Memphis, they don’t touch on issues that we should know about. You know, they don’t have panels about AIDS or STDs or transgender community. They just want to party, have sex with each other, drink, and get high, from what I’ve experienced anyway, and the reason that I’ve experienced it, because I was with them at one point doing that, but as I’ve grown all that doesn’t make sense to me anymore. You know, I can get high and get drunk at home for free, you know. I don’t have to go and pay twenty dollars to watch some girl shake her ass on a pole, you know?” You know, it just doesn’t make any sense. We are absolutely loosing ourselves in what we should be doing. For a lot of gays, lesbians anyway, this is a lifestyle for them, this really isn’t even a life—there is a difference. Lifestyle is a fad, it’s something that you change once every six months. But if it’s a life for you, you want it to be better for you and the people coming behind you. And they just don’t have that focus.

**AU:** What may be some of the positive aspects?

**AF:** The parade. Coming together. The coming together would be the positive. Because we are so, I wouldn’t say we are divided, but the only time you see that many black people together is when Pride happens, or if they’re going to the club. But I guess the unity for standing up for
what you believe in or who you are, and if they could just add some other positive it would be even more better.

AU: Are there more men than women at the parade or is it kind of balanced?

AF: It’s about fifty/fifty.

AU: What do you have to add?

AF: I just want everybody to get along. I do. I want, hopefully when people, whoever reads your thesis, you paper, they see that there’s not just, because a lot of people look at us as, you know, we’re just doing this for the time, and a lot of us are, we are just doing it to pass time or doing it because we hate men or for men because they hate women. But it’s not a pass time. This is a life and it needs to be recognized just as everything else does. I was almost, almost discriminated against at my job. We have a trip that they do every year, you have to maintain a certain requirement from the previous year, and I’m talking about taking my significant other with me when my boss tells me that he didn’t know if it was going to be OK to do that. Now, I would have a leg to stand on, but then again I wouldn’t, because there’s no discrimination for sexual orientation on anything in Memphis, and they need that. We need something to stand on. This is not, it’s not a sickness, it’s not a disease, this is just who we are, and if we could start accepting each other, other people will start accepting us.

AU: How long have you been with your partner?

AF: It will be six years in October, six very long years [laughs].

AU: Was she able to go with you on the trip?

AF: We actually won’t be going until February. And I straightened it out very quickly, because if they wouldn’t, I was waiting for them to say something about it once we went on the cruise, because I would have had their ass on a platter. But my department manager straightened it up because he knew about her. Regardless, if it’s not in writing, it’s still discrimination, so she definitely will be able to go. And if they would have caught me a few years ago when I was a little younger and dumber, they would have had a whole lot more hell than they received. But I know how to be discreet in certain situations, because the company that I work for, they are very religious, very Christian oriented, and I have absolutely no problem with that. I love my job, love what I do, but my life maybe frowned on by them. Which is fine. You’re entitled to your own opinion, but what I do behind closed doors or even open doors is absolutely none of their business. So they straightened it out very quickly.

AU: Do you feel like you have to be a different person when you’re at work because of that?

AF: No. What I do, I do commercial pest control and I do different accounts every day. I’ve been doing this for almost five years. The peole that I see on a regular basis, they know who I am, they know me. Sometimes I may need to tone who I am down. My voice may need to be a little more feminine than usual, and that’s OK with me, you know, because a lot of people haven’t
caught up with the times. And, like I said, when I was younger, I’d be ready to flaunt it in anybody’s face that I wanted to. But now that I’m older and I know bills have to be paid, I can cut back. But it doesn’t change who I am inside, it’s just having respect for the other person. Not throwing it in their faces. You know, people respect you more for that. I’m not changing who I am, I just may, like for instance, I have this elderly lady who’s a customer of mine and whenever I see her she asks me if my husband works at a bank because, no, she asked me one day what does my husband do, and instead of me telling her, ‘Well, I don’t have husband, I have a wife,’ I just said, ‘Well, he works at a bank,’ because she works at a bank and, I mean, I don’t, she’s a sweet lady and that’s not, how can I put it, some things are better left unsaid with certain people.

AU: Just to avoid explaining…

AF: Just to avoid explaining and her not wanting me out there anymore and, you know, just to avoid all that. I just go along with it. Now, ninety-nine percent of the time I am who I am, but in certain situations, in very sensitive situations I may have to alter, I may have to agree, you know. I’m not going to come out and say I have a husband, I’m not going to say that, but certain people I will correct, most people I will correct, but, you know, sensitive situation I’m not going to go all out the way just to say, ‘No, I’m a lesbian and this is my wife,’ and it’s not even necessary for all that.

AU: How might attitudes have changed?

AF: It’s gotten a little easier for us. Just a little, because of all the politics and people running for president and governors and saying this about LGBT, and they are now shedding light on a community that has always been there. We’ve been in the dark for a long time, so they’ve made things, even if they don’t really believe what they’re saying, even if it’s just politics, they’re still shedding light on us, making it a little bit easier for us living our lives.

AU: How did you meet your partner?

AF: We work together. We worked at a Super Target and she actually has never been with a woman before me, and at the time I was a horny toad, and I initially just wanted to have sex, that’s all I wanted to do, and she’s fourteen years older than me. After we first had sex the first time, because she was still messing around with men, I told her it was either me or them. And in my mind, I meant you can’t sleep with them and me at the same time, but in her mind it meant you have to be with me and not them. So we’ve been together petty much ever since.

AU: Is she black?

AF: Yes.

AU: Does she identify as feminine?

AF: Yes. She’s very feminine. She’s probably the most feminine woman that I know. She has three children, that was difficult at the beginning because, like I said, she had never been with a woman before, and because of the age difference between us, she has son that’s three years
younger than me. Him and I had the most problems out of the three of them. She has two sons and a daughter. Her daughter, I’m more close to her daughter than the other two. But we’ve been together so long, and they see that I’m there for her, and in my house, I’m the sole provider, and they see that, you know, I’m not just some rinky dink kid trying to bone their mom. They’ve, we’ve become, slowly but surely become a family.

**AU**: Is your partner lesbian identified?

**AF**: Yes. And if I was tell her otherwise, she could be so upset. She would be. And it’s funny to me because I sometimes think about what it would be like if we weren’t together, if we were to break up, and we actually had a break up about a year or so ago, and it was for about five or six months, and I just knew she was going to go on and be with a man, but she didn’t. She’s definitely a lesbian. To my surprise [*laughs*].

[End Fores].
Appendix: I
Appendix I: Martavius Hampton Interview

This is my interview with Martavius Hampton, twenty-four year old black gay male, extremely active volunteer at the MGLCC and student at the University of Tennessee. The interview was conducted at the MGLCC on June 4, 2011 and lasted approximately one hour.

**MH:** I’m a student at the University of Memphis studying Psychology and Sociology with a minor in Political Science. I work with Planned Parenthood, and I’m also involved with a lot of other agencies, organizations in Memphis. I’m a senior. I want to do research, counseling is kind of [unintelligible] at the agency, HIV counseling. So I’ll probably do research of some sort, LGBTQ research. I have offers in Boston and here, so I’m trying to decide.

**AU:** Are you from Memphis?

**MH:** I was born in Memphis. I moved away for two years to Atlanta and came back. I volunteer here (at the center) and I also try to volunteer with other community organizations, community outreach, homelessness, others that support the cause for civil justice and equality. I guess my philosophy in life is, if you want to see change you have to get up and do something about it. You can’t just sit back and complain and talk. You have to walk the walk. And then a lot of personal stuff started getting close, like ‘wow I can’t get married because I’m gay’ or ‘animals are suffering and they need help,’ so stuff like that.

**AU:** Do you have a partner?

**MH:** No I’m actually single right now.

**AU:** Do you feel like Memphis is a welcoming place for LGBTs?

**MH:** Overall, no. Because we are still in the South, the Bible Belt. Certain communities are more friendly—The community center is in Midtown. Midtown is very friendly to LGBTs, but anything outside of Midtown, we still have a lot of work to do. A lot of work. Even institutions. The whole mentality is not LGBTQ friendly yet. We have a long way to go.

**AU:** What keeps you in Memphis?

**MH:** Honestly, like I said before, I have a philosophy that you have to do something about it. People like to runaway to the big cities like Atlanta, which is fine if you have opportunities, but some people have to stay behind and help build the city up. Everyone can’t just run away. You need very intelligent, motivated people to stay to help Memphis build and not just be number one in crime, number one in whatever. So, I truly believe in that, so I wanted to stay and help Memphis build.

**AU:** How old were you when you moved to Atlanta?
MH: I was 18, fresh out of high school. I just really wanted to get away from Memphis. I didn’t like Memphis at first. I hated it, I always hated it. So I went to school to Atlanta to kind of get away. But I came back and kind of rediscovered Memphis, and the city [unintelligible].

AU: Was there a difference in LGBT life?

MH: Oh yes. Atlanta is much more accepting. It’s almost like you can’t go anywhere without running into the LGBT community. It’s more supportive, there’s less of a stigma, more people are open. So, it was really good for a person coming out, a wonderful thing to be out in Atlanta.

AU: When did you come out?

MH: Well, I came out officially to a friend when I was twelve, but I didn’t come out to my family—I was outed by a cousin when I was sixteen. But, they were very accepting, except my Mom, but that was later on. My family was very supportive.

AU: Your mother was not accepting?

MH: She was not. So we did not tell her. I’m an only child as well, so we’ve always had a horrible relationship in my teen years because of me being possibly gay. We always argued and fought and she wanted to change me and all that stuff. So when I was in Atlanta I told her that I was gay. The words, ‘I’m gay, and you know it.’ So I wasn’t planning on telling her, although I knew she knew I wasn’t planning on telling her, but she made me say it.

AU: Is your family pretty religious?

MH: Yes, very religious. We have preachers and evangelists; I have a very religious family. But they were very supportive.

AU: What denomination?

MH: Baptist.

AU: What do you like about Memphis and the South in general, if anything?

MH: The only thing I can really say about the South is that I get the whole generosity, for people that I know from other parts of the country, they really respect southern hospitality. And that’s one thing I notice and I’m like, well, that’s a good thing. In Memphis, other than just typical food, music, you have to decide. There’s good arts, culture, there’s good education here, some good agencies. We have some wonderful hospitals—St. Jude, [unintelligible], there’s some good agencies here and a lot of people don’t, you always hear the negative things, but there’s good things in Memphis.

AU: What role has the center played in your life?
**MH**: The center has played a big role, because if it wasn’t for the center I wouldn’t have learned about the research that I’m working on now at the University of Memphis, and if it wasn’t for the center, I wouldn’t have met the people and the different agencies and the different partnerships that I’m doing now, because of the center and the people that I met at the center. So the center help branch me and gave me the different opportunities that I have now. I’ve made a lot of friends and a lot of colleagues. It’s a very family oriented place. I feel like it’s family away from family. It’s a great place. And I don’t feel like it’s only for LGBTs, it’s really for all of those that support LGBTQ rights. We have a lot of straight allies, so it’s really family oriented.

**AU**: What do you do here? How often do you come?

**MH**: I’m here at least two to three times a week because I help with HIV testing on Wednesdays and on Thursdays I typically volunteer from 6-9.

**AU**: Does Memphis have a city ordinance protecting LGBTs from discrimination?

**MH**: No. Something we are working on right now. It’s a big thing, and still in the process, because we actually had to withdraw last session because there was a lack of support from the counsel, and we felt there wasn’t enough support also with the community. So we tried to prepare for that to make sure that we have support from the counsel and to have community support as well, because it’s important. And there’s a lot of things people don’t notice—that you can be fired or denied employment because of your sexual orientation or gender identity expression.

**AU**: For a city this size it’s pretty uncommon to not have one.

**MH**: Yeah.

**AU**: I don’t think Little Rock does either. Little Rock doesn’t have a center and it’s pretty big city. But I don’t know how common gay and lesbian community centers are in the South.

**MH**: I think this is the only one in the Mid-South.

**AU**: Do you feel like attitudes have changed?

**MH**: Well, overall I think yes. However, I like to separate the L, G, B, and the T, because transnegativity is much greater. That’s a problem. When it comes to gay and lesbians we are like, ‘cool, ok.’ But even with bisexuals, still kind of, there’s a lot of stigma there, misconceptions, but with the transgender community, there’s a lot of hostility, so when it comes to those two we have a long way to go. And in the South, we are making progress, but like I said, when it comes to transgender issues, it’s very, very slow. It creates this confusion and hostility. It’s like, ‘OK, I understand you like the same sex, but why would you want to be the opposite sex or opposite gender? That’s confusing to me.’ They don’t understand the transgender community. It’s very complex.

**AU**: Are there transgender people that come here?
MH: Yes, actually, there’s one here now [laughs]. There’s a group here. They meet every other Wednesday. We have a small community. You know, transgender is a very ambiguous term, so you have some people who don’t identify as transgender and some who do because they are part time. It’s really complex. But that’s an issue that I feel is really overlooked. We like to group LGBT together, but the T is sometimes left off and the Q, queer questioning.

AU: Would you rather there be no distinctions?

MH: I understand why we are together, the term queer as an umbrella term for everything, because we do share similar struggles, but there are some things that are completely distinct and overlooked. There are people that say ‘gay and lesbian’ rights but you’re leaving out other people when you say that. Gay rights are completely different from transgender rights.

AU: What would you like to see change as far as public policy in Memphis, besides a city ordinance?

MH: Even if I don’t want to get married I feel that we should have the right to do so, so marriage and adoption. Making sure that our hate crimes are taken care of, reported, and that’s on both sides. As well as senior LGBTQs. That’s something that we don’t talk about, and I feel that we need to raise awareness about that and intimate partner violence in the community. I feel there’s still, like, we know it happens but people don’t want to take it seriously. And in the schools there’s this ‘don’t say gay’ bill that’s in session right now, stuff like that, that’s why the South tends to move slowly because of stuff like that. That’s unnecessary.

AU: What kind of issues might gay southerners face in Memphis?

MH: One is the disconnect with the religious community. That’s the big thing for being in the South, the Bible Belt, and with many of us having some type of faith, that disconnect, you know, with someone rejecting you from your church, it’s just, that’s a big issue in our community. Because people say, ‘OK, I’m not going to go because’—there’s a lot of people I know that attend these places and hear all this hate all the time and they continue to stay, but I think there’s a majority that don’t even want to be connected to their faith because of that. So, we’re actually trying to have some type of faith [unintelligible] or panel of different faiths and talk about LGBT issues, because, although you may have your views on, ‘OK, is it right or wrong,’ there’s some common ground that we feel should happen—‘OK, you may not agree with this, but will you support equality in the work place, or support children being adopted?.’ We have to find some way to speak with each other instead of going into your corners and speaking hate. That’s a big issue. And you have race relation issues as well. In Memphis, with the majority being African American, there is a black white disconnect, and that’s something I’m actually trying to help with the center, reaching out to different communities—the Asian community, Hispanic, Indian, whatever, because there’s a disconnect. Which, I understand there are differences, it’s almost like modern segregation in a way, so I feel like that something we really need to talk about and have a frank discussion.

AU: How does being a double minority—black and gay—affect your life?
MH: Honestly, with me, being African American doesn’t really affect me, because I think I get more of the gay thing, so that personally doesn’t affect me, and I’m not saying that I never face any discrimination on that, it may be something behind the doors or something, but that’s probably related to me being openly gay. I don’t hide it, it’s going to be visible somehow, so I’m going to be open. Say if I wanted to work in the school system—that would be probably an issue. I have friends who are teachers that aren’t out because they are afraid they would lose their job, so working around children and stuff, how will people feel about that, me being a gay male may influence that, me being a black, gay male.

AU: Do you feel more connected to one community or the other? Gay or black?

MH: Well, with me, you have to know who I am first. I’m very open to everything. I love everyone, [laughs], I really do…Some people feel that—I used to be called ‘Oreo’ or ‘white’ because of the way I spoke, or the way I dress, or the type of music I listen to. I like S Club 7 (teen pop band) and stuff like that, and it’s just that I feel more closer to the LGBTQ community because you have variety in that, black, atheist or whatever, but I do have a strong relationship with my African American community, there are just issues there at times.

AU: Do you feel that more discrimination comes from the black or white community?

MH: Yes, because I’m always on both ends, because when I’m with African Americans the stuff that you hear is just, I call it white bashing, and because of the privilege, you know, that’s why there’s a separate Pride. We have black pride which is coming up and you have Mid-South Pride, which people from the African American community call ‘white pride.’ Now, if they actually called it the ‘white pride,’ there would be a riot, so that’s a type of disconnect. Dealing with the Caucasian side it’s more of like, I think there’s anxiety because people are like, ‘I don’t want to say anything because I don’t want to offend anyone, and I want to help, but let’s have one of you all, black person.’ And I’m like, you can’t do that, you have to go out and show them. And of course the Latino community is there, but it’s like ‘OK, the issue is just black and white.’ So I see it on both sides, and that’s why I try to come up with this race relations forum also, because that’s important to me. Because some people feel, ‘I can’t come to this stuff because that’s just the majority white people and some people,’ ‘Well, I don’t want to come to this because when I walk in, because I’m white, all the black people look at me.’ So there’s a big issue with that. So I think it’s on both sides. And we both need to do a better job.

AU: Do you think that Memphis’ history with Civil Rights has influenced the present struggle for LGBT rights?

MH: Definitely. It’s a mindset thing. This part of the country, there’s still the mentality of slavery and civil rights and being denied things, you know, and a lot of people hold that you can’t get over that. Some people, I feel, use it as a crutch to say, ‘OK I’m not making it because of this,’ and some people, just, that’s the only thing they have to say. Memphis is a majority African American city, but when it comes to business and, you know, success and stuff there’s still a disconnect, so I think that has a lot to do with it.
AU: Do you feel like the history of civil rights in Memphis makes Memphians more apt to support LGBT rights?

MH: Honestly, no. I’ve tried to, myself and others, have tried to reach out to NAACP and other organizations that are for civil rights, but, like, the African American community, there are some people that say gay rights or queer rights are not the same as civil rights. They do not put them together. Even people in the queer community are like, ‘those are two separate things.’ They are separate with different goals, but I think they are the same. I think the main reason is because of the religious atmosphere. That’s what it is. NAACP is majority African American, which are a majority Christian, so there’s going to be that disconnect. We tend to have more support from those who have a faith that’s a little bit more loose. So, with civil rights here, you would think that we would have more support, but there’s a lot of, ‘OK,’ it’s just very shaky. There’s a lot of resistance and silence and, ‘Yeah, sure we will. OK, I’ll get back with you next week.’ So that’s something I’ve seen and I’m like, wow, that’s interesting. It seems like it takes—I call it the grim reaper effect—something devastating, just bad to happen, for people to unite. Just like the transgender individual that was murdered. People want to try to unite again, ‘OK we’ll help with that,’ it shouldn’t take that.

AU: Was that in Memphis?

MH: Yes, and, actually, recently someone transgender male to female was harassed by a police officer, there’s a lot of legal stuff going on now. We’re actually going to have a rally on June, in about two weeks, about that as well as other legislative things that are going on right now.

AU: Are you still Baptist? Do you attend church in Memphis?

MH: I’m spiritual, meaning I don’t do organized religion. I believe in God, but my concept of faith is more related with the universe and nature and concepts that are rational to me, and they also kind of come from other aspects of different faiths like Buddhism, and then I do believe in certain things in Christianity and Judaism, whatever, I have different parts that [unintelligible]. So that’s why I say that I’m spiritual or that my religion is God. But, being in the South, that’s not enough. The fact that I don’t go to church, it is a crime. That’s how bad it is. ‘Oh, so what church do you go to?’ ‘Um, I don’t go to church.’ ‘Oh, you don’t?’ Just imagine if I was atheist. It would be a war, yes.

AU: It’s a very common thing to ask in the South—where do you go to church?—just assuming that of course you’re Christian.

MH: Yes.

AU: How did growing up Baptist influence your spirituality?
I don’t think it really influence it, because when I began to, I guess, experiment with different faiths, learn about different faiths, and then with my whole sexuality I heard when I was young that being gay is a sin, being gay is sick in the head, and I knew that I was supposedly wrong back then, but then I turned twelve and I was like, ‘I’m going to be who I am.’ Everything in the
Bible to me made sense for certain reasons, so that’s when I went to school and started educating myself. That’s when I kind of got into what I am now. I kind of got away from the Baptist faith.

**AU:** Did you hear that homosexuality is a sin in church?

**MH:** Yes, in church and by my family. So I knew that it was a sin and it was wrong, so I didn’t want—but I couldn’t change who I was attracted to—so that’s when I was like, ‘You know what, I’m gay, whatever. I think God loves me, it doesn’t matter. So I don’t go by the Bible, I just go by God.

**AU:** Do you do anything with the TEP?

**MH:** Yes, I’m actually the secretary now and I volunteer.

**AU:** What are some of the goals of the TEP, or your own goals, whatever you want to say about that?

**MH:** Well, I think our biggest goal is to make sure that our community is protected politically and that awareness is raised in the community, because there are some people that don’t know that these legislations exist, that you are denied this, and I think TEP’s job is to inform us and to raise awareness and to protect us. So I think that’s the primary focus. And that’s what we’re trying to do each week, is to outreach and to get the name out there for visibility, community outreach.

**AU:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

**MH:** Something else that I was going to bring up, the ‘queer,’ you know, it’s very controversial in the community because there are some who just hate hearing the word. Like, if we were called punks or something, I would be like, ‘Oh, no, I don’t identify with that.’ Because I didn’t get the queer, I got ‘sissy,’ ‘punk,’ ‘faggot.’ I didn’t get ‘queer.’ Actually, someone drove by the other day and yelled out ‘queer’ to everyone, very interesting. It’s very uncommon. But in the South, we don’t typically use it, it’s more like California and other regions that use ‘queer’ or ‘queer studies’ in their community. We use LGBTQ, which takes a long time, but I can understand because, especially for aging LGBTQs, that is completely offensive. That is like the equivalent of the ‘n’ word or the ‘b’ word or the ‘f’ word, so that’s another thing about the South, it’s a southern thing. We haven’t adapted to the whole change, and there is a race component to that, because queer is typically used by the Caucasian community, the African American community does not identify as queer. Because probably most do not know what it means.

[End Hampton].
Appendix: J
Appendix J: Interview with Mary Helen Looper

Mary Helen Looper was the first interviewee of my project. She is a sixty year old white lesbian who hosts a monthly women’s potluck at the MGLCC that has been going on for seven years.

We met at Otherlands coffee shop on June 1, 2011 and spoke for about an hour.

AU: Where are you from?

MHL: Greenville, Mississippi

AU: When do you become involved with the partner with whom you had your child?

MHL: 1989, ’88. We had been friends fourteen years, the baby was born in ’92. When she turned three, we separated. My partner got with another woman and the baby started saying that she was being molested by this other woman. She left and moved in with the other woman and denied me access to the child. When she got pregnant we had a lot of papers drawn up of every kind that our lawyer…You can’t actually name the person you want your child to go to, but can suggest who you would like. She named me. We used a sperm donor through a friend. The donors did not sign a legal document. One donor sued us for parental rights for child. I was afraid the donor would get rights to child and that we would not. Susan McKenzie, our attorney and probably the number one lawyer for gay rights, we didn’t want to force something in court that would make a law that would be against all gay people, but we wanted to keep the pressure on in court to do anything we could to protect the child. So we walked a fine line of keeping the pressure going without going to court and getting a bad decision.

AU: How long were you dealing with the Memphis court?

MHL: Eight years. After eight years she was ready to break up with that person and gave the child back to me. She is eighteen. I have to wish the best for her because her happiness affects my daughter’s happiness. My daughter really wants something from her mother that she’s never going to get. She keeps dropping the bucket in there and it keeps coming up dry. When I first started there was one judge unfriendly to gays so we didn’t want him. There was another who seemed to be more sympathetic so we waited for him to take his place.

AU: Do you feel like you were discriminated against?

MHL: I lost my friends. They didn’t want to take sides because of the sensitivity of the issue. A lot of people just didn’t want to believe that a woman could do that to a child. I never had anything to gain by making this stuff up. The lawyer drew the papers up but there was no guarantee that they would be recognized. Never got tried in court. For me, it would have been helpful to at least go to court and have it over with.

AU: Do you feel that attitudes have changed today?

MHL: I don’t think so. My friends that I lost were people that would have been right at the front of the line for human rights. That’s why it was such a shock and betrayal to me that they did not
stand with me at that time in my life. One is an alcohol and drug counselor and the other is an alcoholic. She called me last winter and asked if she could see me. First time in fifteen years—‘I just suddenly remembered who you were and I don’t know why people convinced that what you said wasn’t true. I just wanted you to know I remember who you are and that you’re a good person.’ Now I think I have people I can trust. So the source of the discrimination was not the general public. That was one thing I expected—discrimination from judicial system. The other was not expected. [10:00]

AU: Who was the person who said that?

MHL: I took care of her child. When this whole issue came up—I can understand the background that she’s coming from—‘Nobody took care of me, why are you so into protecting this one who’s not your child?’—and she said ‘I really feel like a child should be with her parent.’ She totally disregarded my connection as a parent at all, and I hadn’t seen her in over fifteen years until a week ago. I saw her at a wedding, and we didn’t talk about the past. It’s been a strange cycle to have the whole thing coming back up again. So, yes, there’s discrimination from the court. My child couldn’t get any justice. My child couldn’t get any protection from this child abuser. She couldn’t get protection because she was the child of lesbians. When we went to the child protective services, it was a balancing act to try to protect my partner, to try to protect her rights to the child and not have her turned over to the sperm donor. It’s hard to say that a child should be with her mother who won’t protect her from a child abuser. It’s hard to say that I’d rather have her with her mother than this other person.

AU: So the donor sued after how many years?

MHL: When she was three years old.

AU: Why do you think he did that?

MHL: I think she was the number one achievement in his life, and he wanted her to give to his family. A few years ago, my daughter told him she didn’t want anything to do with him ever again. She’s never spoken to him since. I didn’t try to make her do that. He would let her down all the time. He was not ever intended to be a parent until the court made him a parent. He never paid any child support.

AU: So nothing ever came of the child abuse charges?

MHL: There was an investigation by child protective services. We had to take her there for a physical examination, and I know CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate Association) was involved, I got a call from CASA, but everyone seemed to be pretty nonplussed as how to handle it. You know, the court is what has to make a decision and when the court doesn’t want to make a decision, nobody else has to make a decision either.

AU: What about your daughter, how old was she…

MHL: She doesn’t have any memory of it…She was three at the time.
AU: What connection do you have to the center?

MHL: I organized a women’s potluck which meets once a month and it’s been going, I guess six or seven years now. They have something called ‘Lavender University’ where they teach classes, and I taught German there for a long time. I arranged for people to take classes there, I had a friend teaching Bridge, my best friend was on the board for a while. I’ve been trying to withdraw from any activity there because I believe that they rig the elections. The elections at the center. I know they rig the elections.

AU: Why is that?

MHL: At a time when one particular person was in charge, he chose whoever he wanted to be on there. And I, you know, that’s fine, he was doing all the work so fine, just don’t go through [unintelligible] for the elections when they’re meaningless. And he didn’t seem to want women involved at the center at that time. He chose people to be there who were very young and had no connections in the community. Someone who just came out, or someone who worked out of town and was never around, women who could not be effective in the lesbian community. Now I think there are some strong women involved over there—Audrey May and Carolyn Witcover—I’m kind of hesitantly waiting to see how things work out.

AU: Do you think it’s important to have a community center?

MHL: I think we’re very fortunate to have a community center because so many towns don’t, and it’s a way for people coming into town to make connections.

AU: Yes, especially in the South, I know this was new to me to hear about a gay and lesbian center. I’m from El Dorado, Arkansas. I don’t know that there’s one in Little Rock, Arkansas.

MHL: We are the only one in the Mid-South. So there’s a lot of potential for good, and a lot of good has been done, but I think they’re going in the wrong direction right now as far as so many social services, social work, a duplication of services that are available elsewhere, and if they don’t keep on with the intended focus of the community center, They’re going to lose an important community. I think they’ve already done that, they’ve been in a financial crisis lately.

AU: What would you recommend they do more of?

MHL: They need to do more of the stated purpose of a community center, more of a gathering place.

AU: What role has it played in your life?

MHL: It’s been an onerous role because they’re not duties that have been given to me by the center, they’re duties which I’ve taken on myself, an outreach for women through the potluck, and I really had hoped to reach towards the older generation who might be losing touch with the gay community who have, through reduced health or reduced finances, may have had to move
out of the city or to the edges of the city and don’t really have the type of connections or support
anymore. So I started a second group called the Moving Feast that moves once a month in a
different restaurant. I move it around town, I even move it to Mississippi so that people who live
in that area have a chance to get to some kind of an event. But my problem with that has been
publicity because when the community center took over the gay newspaper, it died. So there’s no
way to reach people at all. No way to contact them and let them know these things are available.

AU: What newspaper was that?

MHL: The name of that newspaper was called the Triangle Journal. It ended a year or maybe a
year and a half ago. The center took it over and did absolutely nothing with it. And I think that
that should have been one of their priorities. More than some of these other social service
programs they’re doing. The community has no way to contact each other. I know that
newspapers in general are having a hard time, but they don’t even have an online magazine so,
you know. I felt uncomfortable when the community center got started that it kind of took over
and monopolized a lot of things. It’s like putting all of your eggs in one basket and all under the
control of one group of people who have their own agendas. So I think it has been negative in
that way.

AU: How long did you live in Washington D.C.?

MHL: Ten years. I was the television director. So every day I get [unintelligible] the Pentagon,
state department, White House [21:00].

AU: Where did you attend college?

MHL: University of Memphis.

AU: How would you compare gay life in D.C. to gay life in the South in general?

MHL: There’s no comparison. In D.C. there were thirty-four to fifty gay bars for men, for
women, two or three. That’s about the same for Memphis. But newspapers, bookstores and
restaurants—You could spend your whole time in the gay community and never have to step out.
And everybody is a political activist [laughs]. Here there are people who have never in their life,
ever had any contact with the gay community. They just live their life whatever it is. They don’t
support anything. They have their own little social circle and never step outside of it. Probably
been that way for forty years. So people closet themselves, insulate themselves in these little
groups and they don’t mingle with another group.

AU: Do you attend church in Memphis?

MHL: Well, I wouldn’t call it church. I’m a pagan. So I have a pagan group I go to.

AU: When you were growing up did you go to church with your parents?

MHL: Every time the doors were open my mom was dragging us.
AU: Do you think that effected your present spirituality—your change?

... I’ve got a cousin in Jackson, Mississippi who has been very Baptist all of her life and she calls me up recently—her granddaughter came out to her, to the whole family. And the whole family has turned against her. Well, you know, you have to make a choice. What’s more important to you? Is it your own prejudice or is it the child? She said ‘Well, I’m going to meet her in secret and give her money’ [laughs].

AU: So she was pretty accepting?

MHL: She’s going to go with the child regardless. If her husband wants to break up with her, that’s too bad, he can go on. It seems to be the men in the family who are really upset.

AU: Why do you think that is?

MHL: I think they’re part of that Baptist tradition where the man rules the family. It’s really sad because that particular cousin, she’s like that with her family but her sister is totally opposite. She’s really the dominant one in her family.

AU: What year were you born?

MHL: 1951. I will be sixty years old this summer. And what a long strange ride it’s been. There weren’t any gay people in school when I was there. There may have been a rumor of somebody—they called him a fruit. That’s the only word I had ever heard. You know, I wanted to get married and have kids. I always wanted to have kids. I got pregnant when I was sixteen, he was eighteen, so he was A1 of the draft status, so he definitely wanted to get married and have kids. That’s the only thing that excluded him from the draft. So our son was a war protest. And we got divorced after being together about six years. And then a girl that I was friends with asked, ‘Did you ever think about going to bed with me and my boyfriend?’ and I said ‘Oh, no. Why would you ever think I would say that?’ and she goes, ‘Well, why don’t you think about it?’ And that was all it took [laughs].

AU: After that experience, when did you come out?

MHL: I thought about that for a year and she introduced me to some lesbians that I thought were really strange. With my husband, he and I made a trip to visit his brother in Harvard. We went to Sara Lawrence College. And Sarah Lawrence College is a very progressive school. They didn’t have dormitories, they had individual houses and a bunch of kids, male and female, take over a house and, you know, that was the year everybody was on strike because they were protesting the Vietnam War, so nobody went to class, we just partied and did a lot of smoking and stuff, and there was some lesbians in that house and they spotted something in me that I wasn’t aware of in myself. They scared me pretty bad [laughs]. They were very direct and confrontation. So that didn’t work. Yeah, I was twenty-two when I came out. I had this friend that planted these ideas in my head. I don’t know why I ended up at a gay bar but I ended up at a gay bar in Memphis and I saw two men kiss each other and I thought, ‘This is really good. I like this.’
dancing was good, the music was good, the feeling was just right. I didn’t feel vulnerable from
the men there.

AU: Do you remember the name of the bar?

MHL: It didn’t last very long. You had to go into an entry way and show some ID or something.
I’m pretty sure Sharon Ray who gave me my membership card that first night. The name of it? It
had an upstairs with a balcony that overlooked the dance floor. Looking down at the men
dancing together was really exciting. There were not whole lot of women. There were some
women in gay bars but it was mainly a men’s gay bar. Going into women’s bars was still a
frightening thing. Because at that point in time there was still some women from a previous time
who were really into those roles, the role playing—the super macho, kind of diesel dike thing—
and that was really not appealing at all. And then the time when the hippies took over and
women’s lib really hit its stride, everybody was like, ‘Oh we’ll all just be kind of androgynous.’
That was better, that was better.

AU: When everyone was equal?

MHL: Yeah. And then when I started to go into things like NOW (National Organization for
Women)—I was at the very first now meeting we ever had in Memphis, in the basement of the
library, the old library that used to be on Central, no, it was at the university, so there was a lot of
radical women. There were straight women, too, but think the women’s rights movement was
dominated by gay women.

AU: You mentioned not feeling vulnerable around gay men in thebars...

MHL: Going into a straight bar, you can expect to get hit on. You get some friendly groping in a
gay bar, you know, but nothing too threatening.

AU: Do you know how many gay bars were around?

MHL: There’s that one and there was George’s. George’s was on Madison and probably wasn’t
any bigger than this room here.

AU: Do you know if any of those are still around?

MHL: George’s just had a huge reunion last year and I was there and it was great. And there was
a very close feeling because there was no community center. We felt very close to each other
because that was the only connection we had to each other. There was George’s, that was the
men’s bar, and there was Psych Out, the women’s bar. Psych Out was over on Cleveland. I still
get excited driving down Cleveland [laughs]. Now it’s like a Vietnamese grocery or something.
Owned by Sharon Ray. I think she owned them all.
AU: When did you tell your parents you were a lesbian?

MHL: That first woman that I was ever with, after awhile we didn’t share a house together and
we had a boy together, a boy toy. My son was there. We had a three bedroom house and one day
my mother came over and she looked in the closet and she said, ‘All three of your clothes are in, and I said, ‘Yeah, that’s our room.’ I guess that’s how I told her. I don’t think it she really took it in. She didn’t really take it in and acknowledge it back to me until I was in a partnership with a woman in D.C. I think my son was about ten or eleven years old. At that point, though, I had kind of been in relationships but nothing like where I was living one on one with a person. That was the first time, so that was a little threatening to him, and he came home to my mother complaining about it. He didn’t really get along with my partner. So at that point, my mother, I think she flat out asked me and I said, ‘Yes, you’ve always known that,’ and she said ‘Yes, I have.’

AU: So why did she ask you?

MHL: Well, I guess she just wanted an absolute confirmation.

AU: What was her reaction?

MHL: Well, she, like my son, didn’t really like that partner. She didn’t really care for her. She never wavered in accepting me. You know, there’s a lot involved in that. At the time that my son was born, five months later my younger brother was killed, so my son kind of stepped into his role in the family. It was just me and my brother and then he was gone, so it’s like they had to accept me or do without me and I had control over the child, so.

AU: And your dad, was he the same way?

MHL: My father was pretty accepting. He would have accepted probably anything. He wasn’t the religious type my mother was. My mother’s religion seemed to be all about fear. And she seemed really concerned about what other people thought about her. She was the youngest child in the family, so maybe that had something to do with it. I spent a lot of time looking at what is motivating people in all these situations. It’s never just one thing. You’re caught up in your own life experiences and the whole movement at the time. My father, I think they were more concerned about smoking pot. My father would say, ‘Well, I’d rather you smoke pot here in the house than out riding around,’ and I said ‘alright, I can do that.’ So I think he would have felt the same way. My father died when he was only sixty-three and he was twelve years older than my mother, so I was about twenty-five years old.

AU: Have you heard about don’t say gay?

MHL: Ignorance is ignorance in that way. The church has aligned itself with the repression of science and learning and still is. It hasn’t changed in the last two thousand years.

AU: Do you feel like that’s more of a southern thing?

MHL: No, it’s not a southern thing. It’s a worldwide thing. I haven’t lived in the North other than Illinois, for about six months. I don’t think D.C. is the North. They don’t think it’s the North. And I have often wondered what it would be like to live in a more open atmosphere. I’ve traveled—I traveled in Europe. I didn’t find it more open there. I found that when I went further
South in Europe it got more and more repressive. So I went from Iceland to Cairo [laughs]. So I moved down through the countries and it got worse and worse as I moved further south, so I wondered if it had something to do with the weather.

AU: When was this?

MHL: Seventies and eighties. You know, I was unhappy with things here when I left because women’s rights and human rights, just human rights in general, but they weren’t any better in Europe, and in Africa, mmmm, uuh. NO. So I was happy to get back to the U.S. So, comparing it, I still look at the different ways—we have a different way of treating drug and alcohol addiction in this country than they do in Europe. I don’t think our way is necessarily working any better than their way. I think it’s not working as well as their way. But women’s rights, I fear for women’s rights worldwide. I hate to think that our freedoms peaked in my lifetime and they’ve just been eroding ever since, but it looks that way to me. And I think if people your age don’t get out there and demand their rights, they will be taken away.

AU: Do you feel like you lived in a more accepting time than now?

MHL: They were more intense. Definitely more intense. No, now is more accepting. I think in high schools, they think nothing of somebody being gay, it’s no big deal for them. My daughter went to Central High School which is by far a majority black school, and they didn’t really like the black kids. There may have been some people who picked on him but it wasn’t like everybody in school picked on him. And he was pretty flamboyant. He was the most flamboyant gay kid in the school. And at one point he was going to get picked on, and I remember I called the community center and said, ‘Can we do something to help this kid, because he’s living too up in people’s faces,’ you know, if you want to get in people’s faces about anything they’re going to knock you down. But my daughter came to me because she said maybe somebody’s picking on him and I go to the community center. So we as a community can contact this kid and give him another option.

AU: How else might attitudes have changed?

MHL: I think that the police are far less apt to pick on us now. I don’t here of people getting arrested for cross dressing anymore and that happened back in the seventies. I know police don’t raid bars any more. That doesn’t happen.

AU: Did you ever experience that?

MHL: I was never in a police raid, but my boyfriend was arrested for cross dressing. They took his picture and humiliated him. He had a job at George’s, he was a female impersonator and he was on his way from the car parking lot going to George’s to perform and he was arrested. He spent the night in jail. I think that so many people now do the gender bending that it’s just not even, it’s not the huge issue that it was. I mean, you hear about it, you hear about kids being bullied or whatever, but there’s just a lot more acceptance than there was, and at the same time, I think there’s a lot more pressure for people to actually change their gender. There was like a range, you know, you would have the big diesel dikes and the sissiest fairies, and now those
people are probably pressured into thinking that they need some kind of surgery, that maybe they’re not just an ultra sissy boy, that they are a girl trapped in a girl’s body and that they should surgically try to correct it. I think we should have a full range. Everybody should have a full range. Even though I had been pretty involved politically in the whole gay rights movement from the sixties, I had never been to the Michigan’s Womyn’s Festival until about the year 1999, and I was very surprised when I went there that the women were reverting back to this time of butch and femme thing. Where we in the women’s liberation movement tried to move everybody to kind of central thing, and everybody was kind of androgynous and they were mimicking again the straight role it looked to me. Well, OK, that’s fine if you want to mimic, but, and it’s fine if you feel more comfortable in that kind of a role, but everybody shouldn’t have to go into that kind of a role. Everybody should be free to have a full range. That’s what I think. And at Michigan they do allow people to come into the festival, they have a limitation—only women who were born as women are welcome there. So they had some controversy going on, and another group who was transgender set up a camp across the street. I thought, well, that’s great, I having seen firsthand the struggle that the transgender people go through. If they want to identify as women, they can come on over to my group, I’m OK with that. But they had a problem there. I could kind of feel the difference in the energy and the space. Some women would be so close to transitioning it’s like where do you draw that line? Are you going to give everybody a chromosome test at the gate, crash in the people’s tent and look between their legs? Because these people look like men to me [laughs]. It’s just, it’s hard. Discrimination happens within the gay community. Within the gay community there has always been discrimination against drag queens. Call them an ugly name, ‘drag queen.’ Call them an ugly name, ‘diesel dike,’ you know. I guess it’s the human nature of discrimination.

[End Looper].
Appendix: K
Appendix K: Interview with Susan Mackenzie

This is my interview with LGBT and Attorney at Law Susan Mackenzie who works in the areas of personal injury, divorce, and misdemeanor criminal defense. The interview was conducted in her office in Midtown in June of 2011 and lasted about forty minutes.

AU: What kinds of LGBT cases do you deal with as an attorney?

SM: I deal with adoption issues, whether a straight parent is trying to prevent the gay or lesbian parent from visitation or custody issues. I represent gay men who’ve been busted in the park for soliciting. Right now, the biggest thing happening is co-parent adoptions. I’ve successfully done two of those and I expect to have a lot more. I do a lot of work with wills, powers of attorney, co-parenting agreements between, creating the documentation for couples so that if one of them were to become disabled or die then dealing with their estate, kids and all those issues. Those are the biggest categories. One of my earliest cases, I was representing a male to female transgender who was employed by the local veterans administration and was affiliated with the local VA hospital, and as part of her transition, in order to be able to have the surgery, she had to live 24/7 as a woman. And we ended up having to sue in federal court in order to get her the right to come to work dressed as a woman. Judge, I’ve forgotten his name, African American man, federal court judge told the VA they had to sit down and figure it out, and so they had some crazy restriction like how short the skirt could be and the color of the hose she could wear and how many rings she could have on each hand, the size of ear rings and stuff like that, but we got it through and she got her surgery. That would have been before 2004 [laughs].

AU: Were those restrictions being put on her by the federal court or…

SM: Ultimately the VA did not want her to be able to wear any clothes that were female. And the court said, ‘you two need to sit down and work this out because this is discrimination, it’s of federal law, you’ve got to follow it because of the handicapped/disability act.’ He said y’all need to go, so they came in with a proposal that said, ‘no we are not going to agree to this, we won’t agree to this, oh we’ll agree to no more than two rings per hand,’ and so it was like, ‘I’m not going to be wearing that anyway,’ but just principle, ‘I’m not going to agree to that,’ so it was kind of some back and forth back and forth on that, and then ultimately we came to an agreement.

AU: What aspects of aspects of Tennessee law might work against the interest of LGBTs?

There’s several, of course, you now have the constitutional amendment that prohibits gays and lesbians from getting married in the state of Tennessee, or the state of Tennessee recognizing their marriage if it is performed in a state or country where it does recognize gay marriages. You’ve got some state benefits. For example, state taxes. If you are related by blood or marriage, what you inherit, or the first thousand or five thousand dollars of what you inherit, you get exempt from taxes. But if the state won’t recognize your marriage, then you’re not related by blood or marriage and you’re going to have to pay taxes 100 percent of what you inherit, and then you’ve got to fight with the state of going, ‘well, what’s mine and not mine?’ and state possibly coming in and saying, ‘no, you didn’t earn fifty percent. The other person was a higher income earner, so they’re income was seventy-five percent compared to yours, so you have to
pay taxes on seventy-five percent of everything you own.’ And you’ve got that same issue federally now because of the Defense of Marriage Act, but hopefully that will be going away within the next year or two. I think that’s going to be happening since courts have started to rule on that one and it’s a little hard to defend. It should be interesting with regard to the case that Abby Rubenfeld just brought in Nashville in regard to the new state law that says that cities can’t have broader discrimination protection than the state of Tennessee (SAD Act) and whether they can constitutionally do that, is there going to be a challenge or can there be a challenge to our constitutional amendment, does it violate the equal protection clause of the U.S. constitution, which I think it does, but getting the court to believe that and getting some [unintelligible] [laughs]. But, yeah, that’s the biggest one. When the attorney general first came down with an opinion it said there’s nothing in the adoption law that would prevent two men and two women from adopting a child, there was introduced in the legislature a bill that would specifically prohibit second parent adoptions in the state of Tennessee and then the guy that introduced it is no longer in the legislature, and it has been reintroduced, but that’s one of the biggest things that just recently happened in the state of Tennessee, is we are getting second parenting adoptions, it’s been settled in the courts.

AU: What is second parenting adoptions?

SM: A lesbian couple may have a child through art insemination or adopts, with gay couple they adopt or have surrogate, and then under Tennessee, the way it’s been, only one could be the legal parent. They can’t both adopt at the same time, biological is the parent. If the other non-biological were to adopt, the biological parent’s rights would have to be terminated under the interpretation of the statute, but several courts on interpreting the statute like that and say that they can’t exercise their equitable power, the court can waive the termination of the biological mother’s parental rights and have both of them as parents. And so that’s been going on in Nashville for a couple years, it just started happening in Chattanooga, and it just started happening here in Memphis. There’s three of those that I’m aware of and they’ve come down in the last couple of months.

AU: Are there any other major cases that you’ve worked on recently that…

SM: What I did think about sending you is, and this was in maybe ninety-four when was [unintelligible] was governor, but we challenged the Tennessee sodomy statute, and it was declared unconstitutional under our state constitution, and so that was a group of attorneys and then plaintiffs from across the state who got together, and it was actually filed in Nashville. That was the state court and then the 2003 decision was the United States. And so that’s part of why there’s been a scramble to try to amend our constitution because, A., with gay marriage because that’s the trend things that happen, but there’s a big movement afoot and I think that’s what’s probably going to be coming to a vote next year in 2012, they’re playing it on abortion, and they’re saying that there’s nothing in the Tennessee constitution that protects a woman’s right to terminate a pregnancy, and the privacy clause that protects a woman to make her own healthcare decisions, including abortion, that is the privacy provision that is with regard to gay marriages and gay civil rights and stuff like that, too, and sodomy statute was under that, so, depending on the language of the constitutional amendment, if it’s narrowly tailored to abortion, and I haven’t read it and I doubt that they may, it wouldn’t surprise me at all if it’s much broader
language saying that there’s no right to privacy including the right to an abortion under the Tennessee constitution because they want to get rid of everything.

AU: What sort of institutions or conservative organizations might stand in the way of progress?

SM: Well, you’ve got Focus on the Family, James Dobson’s group out of Tupelo, they pop up in stuff, they filed [unintelligible] to the court brief and sodomy statute case. There’s a conservative law firm out of Jackson, Tennessee that could pop up, they popped up on the other side where I represented a lesbian mother and gave some reduced rate legal representation to the straight father who was wanting to use the fact that she was a lesbian to prevent her from custody and to curtail her visitation. I don’t know how proactive they are. I know that the word on the street was, soon after the attorney general opinion came down with regard to adoptions that, there’s a prominent adoption lawyer in town who’s very religiously conservative and he went and got a bug in all the chancellors ear saying they better not grant any of these adoptions and ‘blah blah blah,’ but I was just at a adoption continuing legal education about a month ago, he was one of the speakers, and he came up to me and told me that his position was he wouldn’t do them because he didn’t agree, but he’s refereed some people to me to do their adoptions when they call him and so I don’t know if he’s shifting in the sand a little bit or quite what, especially considering some of the reasoning with regards to the chancellors and stuff like that, so I’m not sure if he was saying that to try to pump me for some additional information or if that’s really the truth.

AU: What are some of the failures or victories in regards to court cases?

SM: Well, one of the biggest failures was the Mary Helen Looper and Pam White case. I thought I had a really good case going forward, because you had one case where they had a co-parent written contract, written co-parent agreement, they’d done the will, done the power of attorney, nomination of guardianships, all that, they’ve done the legal stuff to create that relationship. The other case, they had gotten married, had an elaborate commitment ceremony, that was before any state recognized marriage and it was in Florida so, of course, it still doesn’t. So, I had a Vietnam vet, no, a desert storm vet, I had really good visuals in that case, I’d taken their photo album, and went through pictures from when he was in the hospital, from being ‘baby, baby’ in the hospital, all the way up to helping his mother build this big jungle gym in the back yard, of the parade when she came back from desert storm and their three legged dog and all the way down to one of the last visits when he was just running, she’d come down here to visit and he was just running, running, ‘mom!’ You could just see mommy, ‘I’m so happy to see you,’ and then another picture of them together, great presentation that I thought really told the story and really, looking at those pictures, and did it with colored photo copies when they were still new [laughs] and that case was in division 2, who in that time the judge was Janice Holder who at that point was seeing that there really were some constitutional issues, had appointed a guardian ad litem to represent the child to determine whether or not the joint custody was in the child’s best interest, and the guardian at litem was somebody who was going to be very open minded. And so that was one case and that was the one that [unintelligible] I initiated. The other case was up in chancellor court with a very conservative judge. The other side initiated an adjunction to keep the non-biological mother away, and they were kind of on track together, and then unfortunately Judge Holder got appointed to the Supreme Court and the Judge that replaced her is very
conservative. And so both of those lost at the trial level, and they were close in time so I was able to consolidate them on appeal, hoping, OK, so, the wedding and all this stuff and the artificial insemination, and so it was true there was no data in the picture and all that, and then I’ve got this other case where you’ve got all the contracts and the legal stuff so when you’ve got both of them, you’ve got everything. And there was some strong case [unintelligible] that, where, you’ve had straight couples, and because of the relationship that was created with the help of the biological parent before she’s adopting in loco parentis to say that you are in the place of a parent, and so therefore you have these visitation rights and other rights of the guardian’s child, but as you read about the court, this decision said that the visitation statute deals with divorces, deals with married couples, and since you don’t fall within the purview of this statute, you don’t even have a right to come in and ask for parenting time.

AU: Do you feel like the decision would have been different had there been a heterosexual couple involved?

SM: Oh yeah. Yeah, I do. And there’s been a recent decision that came down where it was a gay couple and the court pretty much did deny, it was a straight couple and they were trying to do an adoption, but there was a biological father who opposed it and since they were not married they didn’t qualify under the step-parenting statute. That case gave us some worries with regard to our adoptions in order to keep those going forward, but I think we can distinguish it if somebody brings it up. So I think that it very well could have been different, probably would have been different if they’d been straight. I don’t think I would ever have won the conservative chancellor, but I think I probably could have gotten the good decision out of Judge Holder. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court didn’t agree to review this case on appeal. Part of the reason might be that was right around the time when Penny White was voted off, you have to vote to reaffirm justices, appellant and supreme court justices here in Tennessee, and there was a big campaign because of some ruling she had had and that she was very liberal and all of that, and they bounced her from the court. They didn’t renew her, so I think there was some concern about taking on controversial issues. I think I would have gotten the right decision if the Supreme Court had taken the case. So it’s disappointing to be that has put this bad case out here that’s potentially hurting others. And at some point hopefully it will change.

AU: Do you think your job would be easier in a different part of the country?

SM: Not necessarily. There’s been a big shift. It used to be you had a few judges that wouldn’t, with regard to when you had the gay or straight parent fight, judges that say ‘unless you can come in here and actually prove to me the fact that this parent is gay or lesbian is going to harm this child, then quit barking up that tree because I don’t want to hear it. Leave it at the door.’ And other judges that would let them go. In the divorce lawyer community, you’ve got divorce attorneys that stir the pot because the more argument, the more fight there is, the more money they make. They do that. And so when you have somebody on the other side who’s got a gay parent, then that’s a really easy pot stir and keep it going and going and going. But as some of the older judges have died and been replaced with some younger judges and stuff, as decisions have started coming down and changing across the state, then you might get a little bit of somebody tilting at the windmill, but they go away a lot quicker than they used to. And some of it’s the nature of the judge, I mean, there was one judge that was one of the best early on judges
to get if you were a gay or lesbian parent, but she had this interior belief that people will ultimately come around, they’ll see the right thing to do, and so she kept giving them more rope and more rope to do the right thing and all they kept doing was the wrong thing. So it would drag it out and make it more expensive and keep the family in turmoil while you waited for this one person to finally click. So that was sometimes frustrating. It’s frustrating when you get done with a case and the attorney comes up and says, ‘well I hope you understand that’s not what I believe’ then you want to say, ‘well why were you in here fighting it? Why were you in here proposing arguments that you don’t believe?’ And so you’re getting a little less of that, but, still, I think that when I’m on the case it’s an advantage because the other side knows that I know the law. And there’s still lots of gay and lesbian parents who believe that there, of course, automatically unfit, and so when, especially if they’re disadvantaged and don’t have the money or are really being down and are scared of even losing visitation, they sign away a lot of rights that the court could not take away from them, and once they’ve agreed to it and it’s in a court order, it’s hard to change. So I think there’s also a lot more education that needs to be happening out in the community so that if they found themselves in a straight marriage and then not straight and with kids, the fact that they can come out and not lose the kids, and all of that. That’s about the biggest change over the years, you used to know, OK there’s eleven divorce judges, basically about fifty percent of them will be safe and the other ones you were kind of iffy, and the other ones you knew that you were going to be screwed, and some of those even turn around themselves. There was one that had a real long [unintelligible] horrendous decision going out of his court, and then I represented somebody a few years later, and I could tell, well, I was guessing—Judges have to get continuing education, too, they have to go to seminars and stuff like that—and I had recently had a case over in juvenile court and the judge, I don’t remember what the words were but there was a certain phraseology that they used (at the convention) and so then I was back three days later in front of [unintelligible], he used the exact same phrase. And I went, OK, there’s some seminar that they went to and talked to them, and so from that point on, and he was one of the ones that stood there and you knew when almost everybody else had changed that when you were in his court you were going to get screwed. But he changed.

AU: How might attitudes have changed in Memphis?

SM: And I think that another thing that has changed is there’s more out gay and lesbian attorneys. I mean when I graduated from law school I was the first one that I was aware of out in Tennessee. Abby returned to the state she used to be the head and the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, and so she probably, about a year after I graduated, left that position and came back to Nashville, but then even now here in Memphis you’re seeing a lot more attorneys are open.

AU: How many?

SM: There’s at least half a dozen. And it’s kind of what’s the definition of open? There’s probably twice that many who are in the closet and some I still don’t know [laughs]. Laura Rodgers is probably the other attorney that deals the most, because once again when you’re in domestic law, because when you’re doing criminal law, really all you’re doing is you’re representing people that get busted tricking in the park, if you’re a criminal defense attorney that’s really all you’re going to do that involves gay rights. And there’s not much you can do
there because those people don’t want to spend the money and risk publicity of challenging the unconstitutional way of how much they’re in traffic, arrested. Probably Laura Rodgers. And the other thing you’ve also got is a fair amount of liberal straight attorneys. I’ll get phone calls periodically from a straight attorney like, ‘Look, I got this client and, what are the cases? If you don’t have recent memorandum, what can you send me?’

AU: What about the Family Action Council?

SM: I don’t think I’ve, they may have filed, because there was a couple of amicus briefs filed in Mary Helen’s case, there was one by this African American minister and the Family Action Council may have signed on with Dobson’s group, but I don’t think there’s anything, there was a, one of the more interesting ones was in juvenile court, and Ed McAteer was alive at the time. Ed McAteer credits himself as being one of the people who got Ronald Reagan to run for president and to win. He used to have these religious roundtable meetings, and it was through one of those, and Ronald Reagan came and spoke. They have one here now and several others groups picketed it, it was at the Pyramid, but Ed McAteer Religious Roundtable I think is what it’s called. He ran for mayor at some point, but he was their leader, and the father of this child, while he professed to be liberal at least while he was in a relationship with his mother, he was a Pentecostal minister, the father was, and so while this trial was going on, they were having prayer circles out in the hallway and Ed McAteer was out there leading them and passing out pamphlets in the court hallway to people about the ‘travesty’ that was going on in the court room. We had a five days trial, and all five days was basically the dad’s attorney putting on their proof, and at the conclusion of that I asked for a directed verdict and was granted, and my client got to keep custody of her daughter. And without having to put on a lick of proof, and this was one of the more conservative judges over there, it’s the judge that was known during his down time to spend that time at the court reading a Bible. And so part of a thing I’ve learned is you can’t really judge what they are going to do by looking at them, you think ‘Oh, I’m screwed. This is a Bible thumping judge referee over juvenile court’ and, you know, ‘This isn’t going to work,’ and I won and I didn’t even have to put on any proof. Another interesting case was one I had in D’Army Bailey’s court. I represented the father who was divorced, mom—he’s gay, she didn’t want him around the kids and the judge said, ‘Unless you can prove that he’s going to cause some harm to these kids, leave it outside.’ So Mom, in the meantime, while the divorce was pending, moved to Mississippi, and we had never filed a counter claim. And so she thought, ‘Oh I’m in Mississippi now, the judges down here aren’t going to be like the liberal Memphis judges.’ But she dismissed her divorce and refilled it down in Mississippi and the judge in Mississippi told her the exact same thing. I think it was over in Olive Branch, which is in Desoto County? This was years ago. But, yeah, so you have little things like that just kind of go…And that case was when I was up in Tipton County and they thought that the judges would be more conservative, and plus there was a period of time when the parenting plans were pretty much automatically there, because parenting plans are court proof form and it had a no-paramour-overnight-when-children-are-present clause in it, and I was successful in getting that clause removed in a case where I represented the lesbian mother because they could never get married, so they could never not be paramours. And the court agreed and the dad was trying to keep that in there, they got rid of it. And now since then, just recently, about nine months ago, a case in, down out of, I don’t think it was Jackson but another one of these middle-west counties, where went up twice, went up and that clause was in there, court was in there, knew that the parties had asked
for it, and one of them didn’t want it, and the court of appeal sent it back down saying that there’s no proof that it was justified so sent it back down, the court held a hearing, put on all this proof that there’s no harm to the child, the court still put it in there, so they appealed it again, and the court of appeals says, ‘No. You can’t have it.’ Struck it out.

**AU:** In general how might Memphis be working towards becoming a better place for LGBTs and how has the judicial system influenced that?

**SM:** I think the judicial system has, because now it’s kind of a safe place to come, it’s coming to the big city where there’s less discrimination than the rural, I think you get that perception anyway, coming on whether it’s gay issues or other issues, people are more liberal and feel out of place in the smaller communities, they’re going to go to whatever the big city is that’s around or that they can get to. You know, I think there’s been several things that have helped across the board, everything from the existence of the Community Center which has been here now for ten years, ten plus years, and I think the fact that you’ve had some stuff such as the gay serving in the military and the billboards that were around here and one of them was defaced and so First Congregational Church was the site for a rally and then they were recently another site for a Unity rally or to the bills that were passed in Nashville. I think there needs to be more outreach with the African American community to help get some of them as allies, to solidify them in the leadership. There seems to be a little more conservative leadership, or vocally more conservative leadership, in the African American community. Because Lois DeBerry, you could count on her all the time. For years and years in the legislature she would come down and speak and was one of the major speakers at the 1985 National NOW conference in New Orleans. And I think that you’ve got Pride having come back, and being afraid being the event that it is, and now we’re doing it on Beale street, so I think visibility. And I think that as, if people see each other fighting the fights, and as they see people out and not getting smacked down in court, then it emboldens them and as more people come out the straight community, I mean who would have thought that even three years ago that you’d say in the summer of 2011 there would be a poll that would say that the majority of Americans support gay marriage? We didn’t even think that any states would ever have marriage, let alone...[laughs]. Now you’ve got New York. And pretty soon we’re going to get California again. But its progressing and I think a lot of it is the younger generation coming into power and finding their voice and having been more around and not in stuff, the religious stuff, that you’re going to see some of that. There’s still a lot of the old card, and now that we’ve got a Republican legislature in Nashville, you’re going to see some steps backwards, and the more we gain some of the bigger the push backs are going to be. But the gains are just going to continue. And I think the biggest change is people being out and about. Seeing this last, second of the two adoptions I just did, it was in the church bulletin. With adoptions, you can get your picture taken with your new family and the judge, and so we had a picture, the judge and me and the two mamas and their three kids and grandmother and it was in their church bulletin. And now I understand that it’s now permanently framed somewhere in the church [laughs].

**AU:** What church?

**SM:** First Congregational. And so as more and more of that happens, you know if the judge comes up and says when I first went up and talked to them, I’m trying to explain the case and
he’s not getting it, then he starts writing it down and he goes, ‘Oh, it’s like your other case that went up on appeal’ and I say, ‘Yes, in some ways it’s like that and in some ways it’s not,’ and he says ‘Oh, OK, OK. Does Amy have a problem with this?’ -‘No, no’ -‘OK, yeah. See you on Monday.’ And then you’ve got grandmas coming in there on both sides and it’s a big family thing and even the more conservative judges that see this see the broader acceptance and stuff there. They’re just parents.

AU: How has Memphis’s history with Civil Rights influenced the LGBT movement?

SM: I think overall the Civil Rights Movement has been a model, has been an inspiration for the gay and lesbian civil rights movement. I think there are definitely some significant leaders in the African American Community—Coretta Scott King who from day one, two local leadership, Ben Hooks and his wife, Russell Sugarmon, Minerva Johnican had been on city council, another name I’m trying to remember, used to be the head of the local NAACP chapter, husband was a dentist, he’s died now, who’ve always been supportive of gay rights and women’s rights and didn’t hide away from it. You’ve got the other side, the churches, who just keep the same, ‘it’s a sin’ and blatant, and often in the church talking about the sin of homosexuality. And so I think you get a lot of that. I think there’s another group that resents gays and lesbians comparing their fight to the African American fight for civil rights. I think they see a real distinction in ‘OK, you can pass, until you tell someone you’re gay they don’t know, but the minute I step out my front door they know I’m black.’ And so I think there’s a feeling that takes away from them when you compare the two movements. So I kind of think there’s those three categories, the anti, more religious based, for the most part, I mean there’s always going to be thugs but there’s always thugs, and so you’ve got the religious, you’ve got the might not be anti-gay rights, but they’re not going to support them because they’re mad because we’re trying to steal their thunder, and then those that are fully supportive and fully get that it really is the same thing.

[End Mackenzie].
Appendix L: Interview with Mark Mitchell

This is my interview with forty-nine year old white male to female transgender in transition Mark Mitchell. He teaches aviation in Memphis and spoke with me on November 11, 2011 in his office for one hour.

MM: I’m transgender. I’m forty-nine years old. I’m currently under hormone therapy replacement for male to female reassignment. I’ve been on hormones for almost a year now so. Basically, what do you want to know?

AU: What do you do here in Memphis?

MM: I’m an instructor. Instructing air craft dispatchers.

AU: Where did you go to school?

MM: Down in Fort Lauderdale for, a school down in Fort Lauderdale as an aircraft dispatcher. I’ve work for an airline here in town as an aircraft dispatcher for three years and because of commuting, it was too difficult to commute from here down to Florida, so started working on certification for this school.

AU: Where are you from?

MM: Originally from Minnesota, but for most of my adult life, Florida. I’ve lived in Memphis for the past four years.

AU: Would you say there is a transgender “community” in Memphis?

MM: There’s a small group. There’s a group, Perpetual Transitions that meets at the center, but there’s not a whole lot. Most basically stay silent. Most transgenders.

AU: Why do you feel that is?

MM: The way I think, from my experience is, here in Memphis, if you’re gay or lesbian that’s OK but transgender, people get freaked out by it. Still a person, still feelings, thoughts, emotions, but if you don’t fit into one category or the other, straight, gay, or lesbian, you’re a freak. I mean that’s really the way I see it. I think a lot of people don’t come out because they don’t feel that they will be accepted.

AU: Do you feel like Memphis is a welcoming place for LGBTs?

MM: For lesbian or gay, yeah, but not transgender. No. I think transgenders in Memphis are where lesbians and gays were back in the 70s, just starting to come out and just starting to win the acceptance that we’re regular people.

AU: Do you attend church here?
MM: I do. I go to a catholic church out in Germantown. I saw that as one of your questions and the catholic diocese here, they’ve got a gay and lesbian program, but if you say that you’re transgender, I mean, first of all Catholics are backwards to begin with. I can say that because I am one. But when you throw in the fact that your transsexual or transgender, you’re like going straight to hell for the rest of eternity for doing that.

AU: What church do you go to?

MM: Holy Spirit out in Germantown.

AU: Are they officially Open and Affirming?

MM: No. Even though they say they’re ‘LGBT friendly’ they’re not. You know, ‘it’s a choice that you make.’ Oh really? You want to grow up feeling completely opposite your whole life? No. I don’t think anybody wakes up and says that.

AU: Have you lived in other places? Were they more accepting?

MM: Just Florida. No, not really. I think when it comes to transgenders, I mean it’s still, people will listen, but they don’t understand. And I think that’s the biggest thing. So if they don’t understand it they fear it.

AU: So do you feel like maybe the South has a little more animosity towards LGBTs?

MM: I don’t know if it’s primarily the South. I think in this area here, people speak out a lot more against it and speak out more than other places because religion here is really prevalent. And again if you don’t understand, it it’s to be feared. And I don’t think they take a Christian approach to transgenders.

AU: What do you like about Memphis?

MM: I like the culture. There’s a lot to do. There’s something all the time. I mean, it’s relatively close to Atlanta it’s close to Nashville. There’s a lot of things to do. There’s a lot of culture. Other than that, there’s not a whole lot [Phone rings]. But I mean other than culturally there’s really not a lot to do. I mean, I’m here because of business, my job. That’s the only reason.

AU: Where would you like to live?

MM: Either New York or Los Angeles. I think they’re much, even Chicago, Chicago is pretty progressive. But New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago.

AU: Do you use the MGLCC very much?
MM: Yeah. I haven’t been going lately because they’ve got a lot of stuff there for the Perpetual Transitions. They’re real big on male to female, or female to male, but not a lot for male to female. Every once in a while I’ll go.

AU: How may have attitudes towards transgenders changed since you’ve lived here, or have they?

MM: I don’t really think they have, I mean, I’ve only lived here for a relatively short period of time. I think that there’s a fear. I mean people, if you tell somebody or somebody finds out that you’re transgender, people treat you like you’ve got the plague. I mean, I’m the same person you knew before. I’m just changing the appearance of my body to the way it is before to match it inside and outside and people don’t understand that. Until people become more educated more accepting. You know, no different than anybody else.

AU: Have you told family members?

MM: Yeah, that’s why I’m divorced. My wife of eighteen years is like, ‘you’re not who I married.’ Well you knew that was who I was when we got married and you thought you could change me. I mean, no. I was in therapy when we got married and was in therapy all through that and, obviously, talk doesn’t change. You can’t talk yourself out of what you are. I mean, my wife will have basically nothing to do with me. That’s not my problem. It’s her problem if she can’t accept me. My daughters, they think it’s the greatest thing in the world. Other family, some accept it some don’t. It’s friends again, I had a lot of friends who were like ultra conservative Christians and they were like, ‘oh you’re going straight to hell. We can’t talk to you.’ I went from having a lot of friends to just a few friends. It’s they’re loss not mine.

AU: Is that coming from religious, the unacceptance?

MM: I think so. I really think so. Like I said it’s, people don’t understand, so if you don’t understand it it’s got to be bad. You know, I’ve gotten a lot of, ‘well you should go to a therapist.’ You should, ‘there’s drug that you can take,’ ‘you can go to programs to change your orientation.’ It’s like, It is who I am.

AU: Have ever been through any of those?

MM: Just talk therapy.

AU: And were they trying to change you?

MM: Most of it was trying to change. And, you know, it just doesn’t work.

AU: A licensed psychologist?

MM: Florida, Minnesota, even at the male clinic. They try to, ‘oh, behavior modification,’ talk therapy. If you look at something one way when you should be looking at it from a different point of view, no amount of talking is going to switch your brain. There’s the WPATH (World
Professional Association for Transgender Health), the Harry Benjamin’s standards that say in order to go on therapy or hormone therapy you have to get letters from a licensed psychologist or a psychiatrist and you go to get the letters to do the therapy and they want to talk you out of it. It’s like, well, if you’ve never liked parts of your body from the time you were this tall, and you’re forty-eight years old now, what makes you think you’re going to talk me out of changing my mind? So.

AU: Did you have to find the right psychologist to have the hormones?

MM: It took quite a while to find somebody who was actually accepting and who was willing to go through the talk therapy and the feedback therapy in order to get to know me and then to basically write me the letter I needed to start hormone therapy.

AU: So several didn’t even talk, they just said no?

MM: Yeah. It was wrong. They didn’t believe in it. It’s like, OK, thanks.

AU: I didn’t realize that “gender identity disorder” was still on the books. I thought that was out kind of like ‘73 when homosexuality was out…

MM: Yeah. GID, it’s still, in fact they just, at the WPATH convention that they just had it’s still going to be in the, DSM? Yeah, so it’s like I don’t look at it as a mental or psychiatric difference. To me I consider myself really quite normal and quite level headed.

AU: What’s WPATH?

MM: WPATH, it’s World, it’s the one that Harry Benjamin gender, it’s the guidelines. If you Google WPATH or Harry Benjamin you’ll find it.

AU: What would you say, also I guess as a , you’re a Tennessee resident?

MM: Yes.

AU: The birth certificate and ID, I guess Tennessee is one of the few states that hasn’t changed the policy that if you make the transition you’re ID is still going to say…

MM: Right. Male or female is the gender marker. For me, it won’t be a problem because once I have surgery, either top surgery or bottom surgery, then Minnesota will go ahead and issue a new birth certificate with female. As far as driver’s license, once I’ve got that, I have a passport and the passport will issue with a new gender marker, then Tennessee will issue a driver’s license with the correct. Which I still think in middle Tennessee, for all we do medical wise and they can’t see their way to give you the option? I mean, there’s some states where you don’t even have to have the surgery like New Mexico or Arizona. You can just say, you can present your letter from your therapist and they’ll change it. What business is it of theirs in controlling that?

AU: What other challenges might you face as a transgender?
MM: I mean, there’s so many challenges. I mean, the primary one is just acceptance. I mean people, I dress as a male, on the outside. I don’t consider myself a cross dresser even though I wear panties, I love having pedicures, there’s nothing that beats that. There’s, you go shopping, well you’re a pervert. If you like movies, books, reading, you can’t like Cosmopolitan, ‘why are you reading that?’ Well, yeah, this is male but inside I think and feel female. ‘No.’ Once I have hair replacement, once I have surgery, lose some weight, I’ve taken my voice from a real deep voice through training, I’ve got a middle voice now and my voice range is coming up all the time, but once it’s more in the female range, then you know at least people will be more accepting on the phone, but people judge a book by its cover. And if you don’t look a certain way, you don’t fit a certain box, they don’t know how to handle you or know how to react around you, and they treat you accordingly.

AU: Let’s see, um, what are some things…

MM: You know, going back to that question, too, like with doctors, when I moved here, I’ve got diabetes, type II, and even going to the doctors, OK, you would think that doctors would be very accepting, and you list out your medications and estrogen, estrogen, [unintelligible], spironolactone, and you go down your list of medications, well, ‘I don’t believe in that stuff, I’m not going to treat you.’ You’re a doctor. I mean, people in this day and age. OK, you won’t? I went though about eight doctors before I found the doctor that I have now and they’re great. They’re absolutely wonderful. And they take care of a lot of transgenders. Dr. O’dea, he couldn’t’ be better. But other ones, they won’t even, I mean, you go n the exam room, they look at the list of medications. Nope. Won’t even—‘go.’

AU: Do you think in Memphis there’s any sort of small push to have things changed as far as public policy, anti-discrimination ordinance…

MM: I think there needs to be more of a concentrated push. I think If there was more education that, hey we are normal people, I mean, I htink probably the greatest spokesman, and it’s pretty sad, but I think the biggest spokesman for transgenders is Lady Gaga, because she’s always putting it out in front of everybody, ‘Hey, people.’ Here in Memphis, I think it’s more lesbian, gay than including transgenders.

AU: The T’s kind of tacked on to the end but it’s often ignored?

MM: The level of acceptance isn’t there even within the lesbian and gay community because again, well, which are you? Male, female? Lesbian? Gay Bi? What are you? You can’t fit you, you’re not easily identifiable.

AU: When did you begin making the transition?

MM: On therapy, about two years ago. And I was in talk therapy with my therapist for a year before I could get my letter for hormones. Now it will be approximately another year, so this time next year that I can have, I’m going to do, if my voice level isn’t in the 220 megahertz area, an acceptable voice to me, then I’ll have voice surgery. And after that, I’ll have breast augmentation, and then after that do sex reassignment probably out in California. But that will be
over the next, I will start that December of next year and then go through surgery the following years. 2013. It won’t come fast enough [laughs].

AU: Do you feel a part of the LGBT community here?

MM: Short answer is no. There’s a few male to female individuals transitioning, but there’s more female to males, which I really don’t understand that, but there’s just female to males.

AU: I never knew which there was more of, is that just there?

MM: It just seems like here in Tennessee, there’s a lot more female to male than male to female.

AU: How many kids do you have?

MM: Two daughters [shows picture of his twin daughters]. In two weeks they will be thirteen. They’re going through their first puberty; I’m going through my second [laughs].

AU: Are they here?

MM: No they’re in Florida.

AU: Do you have a partner?

MM: No I have no interest. No interest. You know, from being married for so long right now I need to figure out my life and go through all the transitions that I need to go through. There’s just no way that I can get involved with anybody until I figure out myself first. It wouldn’t be fair to another person. It wouldn’t be fair to myself. So until I transition, no.

AU: Of the people that you work with that you’ve told about your transition, have they been accepting?

MM: The people that I work with, some have been very accepting, others not really. Like I work with the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) overseas, my employer, so like, I can’t really, until I’m farther along in the hormone process, and I haven’t thought how I’m going to do this, but until I get farther along, I can’t start doing real life experience until I’m farther in my process, because the FAA, even though the government is supposed to be LGBT friendly, it’s not. I dread the day that where I start my real life experience dressing and assimilating, because I don’t know what they’ll say. I mean I think it’s, the FAA can be really backwards, I mean like really backwards. I mean, they, a lot of them still think that it was a bad idea to let women vote. And they openly show that.

AU: What is the FAA?

MM: Federal Aviation Administration. Washington may be one thing, but all the flight safety district offices, especially in the South, they’re totally like 1920s, 1910 thinking.
AU: Like a masculine thing?

MM: Oh, very much so. Oh I know people that are there that are gay or lesbian and it’s like, ‘why are you acting the way you are? That’s not you.’ –‘Well, nobody at work knows.’ –‘Well, excuse me, how can you not know?’ –‘I’m stealth when I’m at work.’ I’m like, ‘OK.’

AU: Do you feel like you have to be a different person at work?
Oh absolutely, absolutely. Aviation, especially. You know, people in aviation are, you know, super jock or he-man. You really have to put on a façade. Get really good at being an actor. Because you can’t, you’re expected to be one way and you’re really something else, but it’s just what you have to do.

AU: Do you feel like you’ll be safe in your employment when you have the real life experience?

MM: I would hope so. Do I trust my feelings? Or do I trust that I’m safe? No. I don’t. I’m very careful where I go. I’m very careful with people that I’m around. I’m always aware of my surroundings. If I have to go somewhere that I’m really not familiar with, I will go armed with a concealed carry weapon. But, I’ve got a permit, but I don’t think that I would really be able to use it. I mean, hopefully someone would be scared by it and leave me alone, but then again you don’t know until you’re placed in a life threatening situation. At work, I can’t use protection here, but at home or, I just am careful where I go. So, like, when I go to the center, I’m always, I’ve been to the center and come out later on at the end of meetings at nine o’ clock and we come out in Cooper-Young, which you would think would be an accepting area, people driving by, ‘Hey, freaks,’ you know, so. It’s like, well, you would think it would be accepting but no.

AU: So you’re a government employee?

MM: No, but I’m an employee at the school here. Right now I’m teaching. I’m volunteering as a teacher. I’m consulting. The owners of the school, I took the school through the certification process and I volunteer and teach, and in turn, they take care of room and board for me. With the FFA, they oversee, they’ve got oversight at the school. Curriculum policy, procedures, but as far as, there’s six people here, and it’s, you know, everybody’s pretty, most of them are paid. I’m unpaid because they’re paying for—you know, that’s the thing, when you’re transgender, when people find out that you are, you don’t get, it becomes harder to get jobs. Especially in the aviation community because it’s such a tight nit community and it’s just very difficult, and I’ve been, when I left my employer here I was unemployed, and it’s, you do what you have to do to survive, and this opportunity came up and it’s like, ‘Can you do it?’ –‘Well, yeah I can do it.’ That’s why I’m here.

AU: Is there anything you would like to add?

MM: I just think, you know, the only thing I would, you know, if like for the universities here, have them include more, be more, offer classes, offer the community, if they added services, even like insurance. Insurance, trying to get once you’ve been diagnosed with GID, it becomes a preexisting condition.
AU: Have you been?

MM: Yes. So…

AU: You have to put it down?

MM: Yeah. So once you’ve been diagnosed with it, in fact, I just found out that Aetna will cover transgender or GID. But I have to check that out because I don’t know if that’s fact or fiction, but insurance companies will cover you if you’re gay or lesbian, but trans, oh no. Even though, if I was just on hormones for the rest of my life, that would be fine with me. I don’t have to change, but, by going on the hormone therapy it changed how I feel. I went from being depressed all the time to having a positive outlook on life whereas if it was covered by insurance, I’m not saying for the insurance to cover transitioning, but just to cover normal things. Without, like, Cobra, with Signa, because I was GID, my Cobra, because it’s after you’re off the fifteen months, then it goes up. Well, because I was GID, it went from being 300 dollars a month, it went from 1500 a month. Who can afford that? It’s next to impossible.

AU: So you were having the same medications but when you switched and put GID, it went way up?

MK: Yeah, and that was because it was a mistake by somebody at the doctor’s office and because they didn’t follow HIPAA and it got put into, got reported, and it shouldn’t have been for that. I was doing self pay, because I didn’t want it included in my normal health records for the insurance issues. Just more programs to include transgender or transsexual in everything else. We do give to the community, we are part of the community, we’re not freaks or anything else, we just want to be included. So that’s it.

[End Mitchell].
Appendix: M
Appendix M: Interview with Mike Robertson

This is the hour-long interview with Mike Robertson, forty-year old, gay white male and Higher Education Administrator, conducted on June 7, 2011 at the MGLCC.

AU: Where are you from?

MR: From Tunica. I moved to Memphis in 1987, stayed here until ‘94, lived in Cincinnati for six years, moved back here and have been back ever since. I went to undergrad at Mississippi State and then I did my masters in Oxford and finished that in same year, ’91, something like that.

AU: When did you come out?

MR: Probably when I was twenty. Of course, you know, coming out has that long definition, started dealing with it when I was about twenty-three, twenty-four, and then technically that process went on for ten years probably, when I finally came out to my entire family and that kind of thing.

AU: What was your family’s reaction?

MR: Fine. You know, even though we’d grown up Southern Baptist and all that stuff, in fact, I technically didn’t come out, I was brought out. I was asked, my mother asked me. She kind of spurred it and said, ‘Let’s talk about this.’ But fine, you know. Still some religious hang ups from them, but it’s no big deal. They accept my partner and all that stuff, so they’re OK.

AU: Are you still Southern Baptist?

MR: No

AU: Do you go to church here in Memphis?

MR: Yeah, I go to First Congregational right up the street.

AU: How long have you been with your partner?

MR: Three years, a little over three.

AU: Do you think you would eventually marry if marriage equality was achieved?

MR: Probably. I think, yeah. We’ve discussed a commitment ceremony. Yeah, we probably would if it were a legal thing. I know we would. Because now we’re battling all those things we can’t get because we can’t be legally married. ‘What are we going to do if I die or you die?’ That kind of thing. So, yeah. I’m sure we would.

AU: What role has church played in your life?
MR: Significant. All through childhood and then got to college and it basically stopped. And then it basically stayed stopped until I moved to Cincinnati in ’94. And I started going back to church, to a Presbyterian, very liberal church. So there was that one gap, but for the rest of the time church has been pretty significant.

AU: Why did it stop?

MR: Disillusionment. Battling with who I was and what the Southern Baptist church said about me and just, you know, partying, things like that. So it just was probably at least a ten year gap of hardly doing anything, church-wise. And now it’s very important to me.

AU: So you were in Cincinnati for six years. How would you compare LGBT life in Cincinnati to Memphis?

MR: Not that different. Cincinnati’s a fairly conservative city if you know anything about its history. Cincinnati is South, you know. Kentucky is right there, so it’s basically northern Kentucky. So it’s pretty conservative. It’s where all the stuff happened, you know, with the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit. Larry Flint and his issues came from Cincinnati, so it’s a pretty conservative area, but, you know, really it was bigger, a bigger population but still not that—they did fight for sexual orientation to be added to the anti-discrimination clause, there was a closeted lesbian who was the mayor, but she wouldn’t, basically, reveal that, but not a lot of difference in Cincinnati and Memphis.

AU: Do you feel like Memphis is welcoming to LGBTs?

MR: NO [laughs]. Not as a whole, no. Are there LGBT people welcoming to other LGBT people from elsewhere? Sure. But as a whole, no. There’s just not enough laws, which now, that has hit a stumbling block. Not enough companies that offer domestic partner benefits. So, no.

AU: What role has the community center played in your life here in Memphis?

MR: I’ve never frequented the community center. I’ve volunteered for a few things, but I’ve always felt it was very important. Especially since they moved here, have a permanent location. So very admiring of what they offer, what they do, supportive to some degree, not a huge monetary contributor, but certainly a member. So I would hate to see it ever go away, let’s put it that way. There’s just too many good things that it offers. Probably since they’re permanent, you don’t drive up and down Memphis and see too many rainbow flags, at the bar maybe, but, so, I think it’s pretty significant, with that alone, that there’s a presence—a gay and lesbian center and a rainbow flag—is good. When you have a big city, you have people from all over, and I think those people coming from smaller towns, just seeing, just driving by, seeing it, would feel some comfort.

AU: So you’re involved with the TEP?

MR: I’m a member, I get the emails, I go and sign as many petitions and notes as much as I can.
AU: Memphis doesn’t have a city ordinance protecting LGBTs?

MR: No, and of course, with recent legislation, we can’t have one, technically.

AU: I was kind of confused by that because it was all about commerce and business.

MR: Yeah, because when I first went to sign the petition I was like, ‘This is not the right things, is it?’ but, you know, they hide things and stick things in other bills. I just don’t personally understand why what one city does matters to the state, I mean, it would be different if the law was, ‘OK, we reserve the right to kill people whenever we want,’ but when it’s basically a matter of human rights and personal issue, who cares? I don’t see how it can stand up in court, but maybe I’m wrong.

AU: Does First Congregational support gay rights? Are they involved in some activism?

MR: Very much. It’s probably, there’s two—Congregational and also United Church of Christ, which is what President Obama is—there’s two in the city, technically three now, probably the three most liberal churches, Opening and Affirming is the designated phrase, meaning open and affirming to gay and lesbian people, so, and then the other United Church of Christ is formally a MCC, gay church, and they’ve now changed to Untied Church of Christ. To give you a good example, one Sunday I was running late and a woman stopped me and asked, ‘Is this the gay church?’ and, you know, I answered that almost, I know what this means, should I get in this debate with her, you know, I was like, ‘We accept gay people.’ She wasn’t looking for a gay church, she was looking for someone else’s church. I guess, she was walking, it was weird. But a lot of people did refer to us as a gay church because of a, I mean, MAGY (Memphis Area Gay Youth) meets there, gay youth is there, but our church, we’ve done just about everything you could do, the rally, the last big rally opposing some issue, I can’t remember which one right now, [laughs] was on our church steps so there’s not much that we won’t—mostly we try not to be political, but there’s not much that we won’t stick our nose into. The Mid-South Peace and Justice Center is there, and you have to be to rent space from us, you don’t have to be one of us but you have to agree in principle and standard with what we stand for, and so, Peace and Justice Center, you can’t get much more Open and Affirming as they are, so yeah, to answer your question, very supportive.

AU: Do you feel like it’s important for religious communities to work with secular organizations to promote gay rights, especially in the South where there’s lots of discrimination coming from people’s religious backgrounds?

MR: Oh yeah, I think it’s definitely important, but does it happen much? No. Our pastor spoke at a Presbyterian church about a month ago, and they have this series of topics and the one she was asked to speak on was basically inclusion of gays in the church because their church was grappling with the issue of, I guess, inclusion, ordination, and all those things that the Presbyterian Church has gone through. So she went to speak to them about it and I went to listen, it was just interesting. You go to a big church like that and it’s just no big deal to them. They were pretty much open to the idea, but knowing that the next one next door would, you know, slam the doors, you know, and have a hissy fit if that were, so yeah, I think it’s very important
for religious organizations to try to—the one thing I think that—there’s a woman at our church who’s not our pastor but a pastor at some other church—she’s just pretty big on WWJD (What would Jesus Do) for a while—she’s kind of taking that at a different angle, you know, ‘Is that really what God would do’ about, you think he would shut the door on whoever—gays, poor people, etc. So, to me, it’s a basic tenant of Christianity. Trying to merge with secular as much as possible is a good thing.

AU: So you’ve participated in some rallies in Memphis?

MR: The one we had, I think was when Memphis was trying to get sexual orientation added to the non-discrimination clause in hiring city employees. That was the most recent and a pretty big one because we were able to get a lot of politicians to come speak, and you know, that’s always good, to use cameras. And so that one and then of course I’ve been to every Pride parade of the city for many years. And, you know, I’ve been to others I can’t remember right now. I’m pretty vocal with the pen, writing letters to editors and that kind of thing.

AU: What kind of letters do you send to editors?

MR: Anything that I’ve gotten just, more and more, the older I get, I get to where things that are wrong just bother me. And I don’t mean, you know, we all know that stealing is wrong, but the things that people just let get by. And a few of my friends tease me all the time, ‘Oh, he’s getting the pen out again,’ and I literally go into a back and forth with a local politician recently. Oh, he had called me and left a voice mail, this is not gay related, but in a way, city and county school issues, whether the city was going to absorb the county, consolidate, and he calls and leaves a message asking me to vote against the city surrendering its charter. Well, he doesn’t live in the city, he’s a county commissioner. ‘Why are you calling me?’ So, I just wrote him and it got into like a twelve year old school girl thing. He was very, I tried to be as professional, and he was writing me back with these cryptic little short, little ugly answers and I was like, ‘You don’t even live in the city of Memphis.’ So those kind of things that are not big issues, but they’re wrong, and therefore have started to bother me. Maybe the more comfortable I get with myself, so I tend to send letters or make phone calls or open my mouth. At work we never had sexual orientation in the—I work for a college, so we’re split staff and faculty. We follow most of the same rules, but one of the things that I discovered that was different was that faculty had protection through a non-discrimination clause or whatever, and we didn’t have it in ours. So I went to my boss who was the vice president and said, ‘What’s up with this?’ and he said, ‘I’m not sure. You need to talk to HR.’ So I went to HR, and she said, ‘You’re exactly right, we are supposed to have the same non-discrimination in place,’ so she drug her feet, but eventually that got added to our non-discrimination clause that goes in our catalog and out to all our publications, so small victory, but the next thing I want to tackle, ‘OK, you can’t discriminate against me, but what about domestic partner benefits?’ You know, ten years ago I would have never done that. I would have never pushed the envelope as much as I push it now. And I guess that just comes with comfort and old age.

AU: Do you feel like attitudes have changed over the years?
MR: Oh yeah. I firmly believe in, I don’t believe in totally outing people, but I firmly believe that the more people who do come out, the less a problem there will be because it’s when you know somebody that it changes things. If people hide, if more and more people come out, it chips away at the people they know and the people they know. Eventually you start beating down those walls because it’s not them, it’s us.

AU: I want to know more about the letters you write to politicians.

MR: Well, the senator who promoted the bill that just passed over not letting any city add sexual orientation, I wrote him directly and started off with that bad tongue, and just all the sudden something stopped me. I just stopped and said, you know, I’m not going to win anything with this, and my message to him was that I hope your kids or grandkids are not gay because you will force them into a life of shame and guilt and suicidal thoughts and that nobody, nobody I don’t care if your Reverend Phelps from the church in Kansas, nobody’s kids should have to go through that. And I thought, ‘Can I make this man understand that I’m just like the people he knows?’ So I wrote him stuff about my grandmother. She was a Southern Baptist and all that, and he just, ‘Psssh.’ I give him credit, he did write back ‘I appreciate your passion but…’ And he went into his thing, and I still thought that, I don’t want anybody to go through those things. And the sooner that he finds out, and, you know like I do probably, that there is somebody gay in his immediate family. And the sooner he can find that out, the less likely he is to try to enact things that are detrimental to the gay community.

AU: What did he say were his reasons?

MR: Well, he tried to put it back in a biological perspective to some degree and say that, you know, heterosexuals reproduce, so that part makes sense in the biology conversations—Oh, wait, this was the legislation where you can’t say gay in the schools—and, you know, I was just like, ‘These kids need people to talk to,’ and he was said, ‘I just don’t think that school is the place that this should occur, that the parents are the ones who should talk about it with the kids. And I was like, do you not get it mister? Do you not get it? The kids don’t feel comfortable talking to you and that’s why teachers are there? I’m not saying that they should get up in front of the school and wave a rainbow flag and say, ‘I’m gay and you should be to,’ nobody wants that I don’t think, but it’s something that at least they would have someone to come to, and his response again was that it’s a biological thing, and that parents should do this, and I can’t remember the one other one, but I was just like, I didn’t write him back. I started to, but I was too tired that day or something. That was the other things he said—they had past anti-bullying legislation, so kids were safe. Because they passed a law that said you’re not supposed to bully, and I thought, ‘Well, yeah. That’s what every eighth grade kid does. They look at the law at the school and say, ‘I can’t do that.’ So it was a very naive response. Again, don’t think you get as far with fighting. I started out with this man, I was going to let him have it. And I said, ‘No, I’m not going to appeal to anyone that way,’ so I toned it down. And then my response was still going to be, ‘You just don’t get it.’ But I just dropped it.

AU: Tell me about your Pride parade experiences?
MR: Well, did them here, did them in Cincinnati, and, you know, I can remember going to them at some point way back and thinking, ‘They always show this on TV, and they always take pictures. Am I going to be in a picture?’ But, you know, being brave [laughs] and going out there. And then overtime, of course, that all went to the wayside. And I don’t, did we have one last year in Memphis? There’s been a few years that we did not have one. It’s always a million degrees, but I think it’s one of those things where people need to go just for presence, just for numbers, and the media usually likes to show the drag queens more than anything, but that’s OK. I mean, at least the drag queens were out there, right? So, I usually just go and stand and sweat and wave a flag, and, you know, hang out for a little while. I just think it’s one of those things you should do, you know. You never know, maybe somebody will see me and go, ‘I didn’t know he was gay,’ and if they’re dealing with those issues, because nobody like, those things aren’t fun. So yeah, I’ve sweated a few gay pride parades.

AU: Are they pretty big in Memphis?

MR: Not really. Compared to Cincinnati there wasn’t a great big difference, but they usually go from First Congregational all the way to Peabody Park which is just past Central Avenue up here, not that it’s that long, but that’s the route, and it seems like the last several it got, not necessarily bigger with the huge numbers, but like, Fed Ex employees would be in it and a couple of other corporations maybe, and that always was good to me, that it wasn’t just a rainbow flag and cars and drag queens. And it was more well representative of who all was in the community. So, nothing, not like New York, but we do have a big flag that [laughs] is pretty dad gum big. So, it is kind of—it’s pride. It’s like, ‘It’s OK, let’s have a little pride for a day or two.’

AU: What does it mean for you to have that here, or for the LGBT community?

MR: I think it’s a reminder, and it needs to be a reminder, that there is a community. It’s one of those small things, it’s like the flag out here. It’s a small thing, but you never know when it’s going to influence somebody in a positive manner, and there’s just not that many positive things in the South for gay and lesbian and transgender. So it’s just one more thing that can let somebody know that they’re not alone, you know. I think it’s important. Some people poo poo it, but I think it’s very important.

AU: Have you ever thought about leaving the South?

MR: Well, Cincinnati was kind of my, you know, when I left Memphis to move to Cincinnati I didn’t, that job search, I said I would live anywhere. I sent resumes to upstate New York, Massachusetts, the West, Minnesota, I was adventuresome, ‘Let’s go out.’ After living in Cincinnati for a while I realized I couldn’t have dealt with the winters in the North much more. Would I leave the South again? I don’t know. Maybe. I’m pretty entrenched now. I like the South! I love the South. Obviously, but you do when you go to places that are more open and accepting you do feel that difference.

AU: What do you love about the South?
MR: I love the food, can’t you tell? The down home-ness of the South, which is kind of funny because it’s a dichotomy, too, because in the gay community, at least in the male gay community more often, one of the things I despised was the elitist snobbery, but that extends from the elitist snobbery in the South. I mean, it’s kind of like I said, a dichotomy of two different worlds. But, anyway, the relaxed nature, the friendly nature, that’s probably it in a nutshell. Living in Cincinnati was not the best gauge of the rest of the country, but I’ve been to certain places where people just aren’t nice. So the niceness is the thing. And the laid back-ness.

AU: Have you experienced discrimination here? Outright discrimination or subtle? Whatever you have to say.

MR: You know, I don’t think, I have had friends who once they found out I was gay, backed off, that’s not really true discrimination I guess, but kind of backed off, you know. But I really haven’t. I’ve never been turned down for a job or housing where I thought it was because I was gay, or not served somewhere. On the flip side of that, I’ve not felt comfortable to hold hands with my partner in public in certain places, so is that discrimination? I don’t know, you tell me. But so, in that aspect, I guess a little. But nothing major. At least that I can remember. I’m sure I’ve been called ‘fag’ and ‘queer’ and those kinds of things, you know. By a passerby or whatever, but nothing significant. I’ve been pretty lucky I think. But I think that also comes from, once I came out, my attitude was, ‘Like me or leave me. I’m not going to try to be somebody I’m not.’ So I guess I’ve been pretty lucky with that. As people are more, lesbians who are more masculine, males who are more effeminate, have a visible something that can cause discrimination and violence. Which, you know, I think we all went through a phase when I came out of, ‘I can’t be associated with them. They are too effeminate,’ whatever. And that’s just as discriminatory as people who discriminate against the most masculine gay man on earth. I mean, it’s the same thing. So I tried to get passed that. I think it all goes with that brain up there and what you were taught. But, you know, as much as I was brought up Southern Baptist and what not, the first guy I ever did anything with was the Southern Baptist preacher’s son. Terrible. And reconnected with him recently on facebook. But I don’t ever remember my parents bashing gays or even church really. I never really had that. There was much more racially motivated prejudice than sexual orientation motivated when I was a kid. Maybe it’s because we lived in the country. We just didn’t know anybody that was gay. So I didn’t grow up thinking, I’m sure I heard things, yes, but not bashing of any type. And really, the racially things weren’t that bad. Just certain things, you know, we’re in the South, I mean.

AU: How often do you come up to the center here?

MR: I’ve only been up here a few times. One time I volunteered for the gay and lesbian film festival, so I had to go to meetings there a lot.

AU: Is the film fest an annual event?

MR: It is. It’s gone from being pretty small, and it’s become a pretty nice—that’s another thing that’s out there, because it’s out there, you know, they have it at a major theater, and because it’s out there and people can see and go, ‘Oh, they do do more than go to bars and such,’ so it’s another one of those events that I think there’s a magnet for it right there. It’s a draw to people
that might be closeted, and also a draw to people from small towns. I mean, it’s a whole week of movies that you’re not going to see—in fact, it was funny though, the other day I was watching one of the Showtime channels, and there was a movie we had seen at the film festival a year or two ago. It was a very good topic, too, so it’s just like I said, one of those events that needs to continue, if nothing else, just for the exposure.

AU: I’d like to know more about the kind of issues you’ve written legislatures about besides the ones you mentioned.

MR: Probably at some point the Defense of Marriage Act on a national level wrote, probably a lot of times it’s easy to do those, where they say ‘click here,’ copy and paste, you know, I’ve probably done a bunch of those where I say, ‘OK, whatever they tell me to say I’m going to send it.’ So I can’t really think of more besides the non-discrimination, the school issue, DOMA, those are probably some of the bigger—and I do that with local issues as well. Because what good does it do if I don’t put it in writing? And our pastor is on this panel that the Commercial Appeal uses over topics with different religious leaders, and so she often has something in there, too, about LGBT issues, so she’s kind of an inspiration in a way.

AU: Your pastor, is she LGBTQ?

MR: No. It’s kind of funny because everybody just assumes she is. She actually didn’t get married until four years ago, five years ago, something, and they made some kind of toast and somebody wrote these lyrics or words to the toast and it rhymed and something in the thing was ‘First Congo’s preacher’s marrying a man,’ and I don’t remember what the line was before, but it got the biggest reaction because everyone just assumed that she was. Which is another good thing, making an assumption is not always the best way to determine things. No, she’s not, but very, very—in fact, when she got married, one of the things that she said, I don’t remember, after the church gave her a gift, was that their biggest concern still was that their gay and lesbian friends and relatives still could not have, experience the same thing that she was experiencing. So she tends to bring a lot of things back to that. You know, the issue of fairness and equality.

[End Mike Robertson].
Appendix: N
Appendix N: Interview with Sara Shughart

This is the interview with Sara Shughart, transgender and student at the University of Memphis. The interview was conducted on December 19, 2011 at the MGLCC and lasted an hour.

AU: Are you from Memphis?

SS: My dad moved around military bases, that’s what he did for a living. Moved us around a lot every few years, or every year. So I lived in a lot of places. Family’s mostly from here Memphis-ish, one side of my family is, the other side is up in Colorado. I’ve been back in Memphis proper for about two years now, I lived in Memphis two years prior to that, but I moved away for a year to come back. I lived in the outskirts for about four years previous to that. So in the area itself, eight years, give or take.

AU: How old are you?

SS: I’m twenty-three.

AU: Can you talk about the process of transitioning or coming out?

SS: I’m not completely out right now, I’m out, I function in Memphis as Sara, ninety percent of the time at school and work, though my boss knows, I’m not out there because we have a lot of clients on a daily basis, at least thirty, forty clients, a good chunk of them religious clients. I’ve been out for the better part of five years. Been functioning more or less like this for the better part of three, where I’m just about out everywhere but work and school. That process, I realized what I was at about twelve, I was trans, when I found out the term. And from there, just been slowly building up until I moved out of the house. While I was still in the house I had a friend who was able to introduce me to the culture at large which is nice, I ended up here first time at about sixteen, about nineteen I moved out. And when I moved I went what I call fifty-fifty where I was out at home, out with friends, but at school and work I was still male and with family I was still male. That’s since changed so a lot of my time has actually increased. The big change really started about twenty-one when I started dating my ex-boyfriend and I went almost full time save for school. I was out where I was working at the time, I was out just about everywhere. I was even going to class dressed as female, the only difference was I was still presenting as male to most people.

AU: So how has your family been during this transition? How have they responded?

SS: My father doesn’t know, he will never know, he’s not a part of my life as a rule. They’ve been divorced now for a year, separated for almost nine now. He hasn’t been a part of my life really in any big context since I started high school. He’s there, he usually just makes my life hell when he is around. He’s a bastard in every sense of the word. My mom, both my parents are devout Mormons, so I’m kind of getting screwed there, but it happens.

AU: What about you?
SS: I’m happily agnostic. I grew up in a lot of the Mormon church. I’m technically still a member because I was never excommunicated. So yeah, not much going on there. My mom hasn’t taken it well. She understands that I’m going through this process. I live with her right now, but at the same time she’s like, ‘I really don’t want to be a part of it and I really don’t want to see it.’ But I understand. First came out to her in middle school the time I figured it out, then it didn’t stick, I guess she didn’t realize that’s what I was saying. I did it again in high school and she got that it was my sexual orientation from it, which is true but she didn’t get the secondary portion, thought I was maybe a cross dresser or something. Then the final straw was when I went for an internship about two years ago or attempted about two years ago where I was going to go full time working at a trans shelter essentially. The internship never happened, but I got stuck living with her, so pretty much everything kind of went, ‘here’s the truth, you can deal with it you can kick me out, those are your options.’ For a month there I was homeless completely. She got over it pretty quick thankfully. We lived with my grandmother who is a devout Baptist for about a year after that, so I was completely in the closet, and now I’m slowly coming back out and starting to do things again. So, even when I was living with her I was still doing stuff I just wasn’t going as Sara, I was just Sara and it’s very confusing I’m sure. My sister she claims she’s Mormon, I don’t know how true that is. She’s a scientist in the way that if she can’t see it she doesn’t believe in it, and then there’s the whole Mormon thing and I still haven’t figured that one out. She thinks that I haven’t figured myself out yet, I’m not really sure why. I’ve asked her about it so I know, for the most part she just thinks it’s whatever. She usually just rolls her eyes and goes, ‘OK.’ I don’t really know where that is but oh well. As for the rest of my family, don’t care about them, don’t want to have anything to do with them most days, a bunch of rednecks for the most part here in Memphis. The other side is completely Mormon, so I’m kind of like—There are a few exceptions but even then I could really live without them. So the only two that really matter in my life right now are my mom and sister and even then it’s become tense in the last two years. So we will see what happens there.

AU: So it hasn’t been very easy with the family?

SS: Not as such, no. Just kind of rough. I’m almost completely out to all my friends. There are a few people I’ve met through work that don’t know as such. They know that I’m involved in the LGBT community, they know I do stuff like here at the center, I do, or have done stuff with the school group, they don’t know to what extent. I think maybe one or two know I’m trans but that’s about it. For the rest of my friends, they completely know. So yeah, most of my friends, maybe ninety percent know. And the ones who don’t know know that I’m involved in the community.

AU: What role has the MGLCC played in your life? When did you discover it?

SS: Sixteen through Lavender University which is a program that no longer really plays—it was an educational circuit that Perpetual Transitions was [unintelligible]. Back when Casey was the only one really running it. Since then I’ve dealt with them before on a smaller basis. I started more at the university level working with Stonewall Tigers at the University of Memphis. For about two years that’s where I was spending ninety percent of my time was actually in the Stonewall office working. Following that about April, late April, early May of this year I got started with the center again. Well, it asked me in November of last year to help with PT
(Perpetual Transitions) as was being run by Moe, James Owens, and it was kind of suffering, I’m not really sure if I’m going to point a finger as to why it was suffering or to what extent, it just was suffering. From there, I was still involved with Stonewall, so I wasn’t able to devote the time necessary to come and re-start and reinvigorate the group, but I was interested. April or May, found out about MCRH, Memphis Center for Reproductive Health, now Choices, they were trying to start a trans health initiative and I wanted to get involved. Best way I could do that is through a trans group because I knew I wasn’t going to be able to do much through the Stonewall Tigers with that because there were two trans people in the group of an entire university.

**AU:** You and one other person?

**SS:** Yes. Other than that I’ve been here for about six months working my happy ass off. The workaholism. Other than that, the center is where I spend a lot of my time. I was working with QAY (Queer As Youth) in here, since last November, which is the youth group here, and yeah, I spend a lot of my time here now. The ninety percent of my time that was spent at Stonewall is now spent here. Or on stuff for the center.

**AU:** So how important was it to have the MGLCC?

**SS:** This one, since coming to the center it’s been less about that, I do use workaholism as an escape, obviously, it’s very much getting away from family stuff, I bury myself in work, but that does have its limits, and I do, for the purposes of the center, less of my personal stuff has been affected here, this is more stuff I want to do for the community than for myself. Stonewall on the other hand was there, when I was kind of stuck, just needed something, and in a lot of ways that’s what I was doing a lot of and, yeah, I was burying myself there just trying to get away from it. Neither of them were very therapeutic in that regard, but they never were supposed, I don’t think. They are for support, not straight up therapy.

**AU:** So do you feel like there’s a tangible transgender community here in Memphis?

**SS:** Tangible, yeah, definitely, pretty good size one. The question is how active are they? We have the drag community which does make up a good chunk of the trans community, and here in Memphis especially, they’re pretty prominent—Spectrum, Crossroads, Friends of George, they are very much there, very much active. They’re the gay bars slash clubs. They are very much active members of the community, but not as active with stuff we are trying to do here—activism, outreach, education, awareness. The big thing about transitioning is, once you’ve completed it, a lot of people go back in the closet. Transsexual, I’m sure you’ve come across this before, it’s not like sexual identity. Once you’re done with it, no one really needs to know unless you’re going to bed with them. To all extents and purposes, you can look like a straight person, completely heteronormative, completely everything, you look what society thinks is normal. A lot of people do that and they don’t want to have anything to do with the trans community, they just want to go about their lives. I fully respect that and understand that. For the most part when you hear about someone who’s not active in the community in any way, not active in the drag community, or not in the activism portion of the community, it’s because they’re having some kind of legal issue come up like where they’re being affected by the cops in some way or they’re like the woman who was just trying to get her ID changed at the DMV. I mean it happens, it’s
horrible that it’s happening to them, especially since they’re trying to live their lives as heteronormative as possible. Not a whole heck of a lot we can do for them, though, except what we’re trying to do here. There again, there’s another community that do kind of come out when they need help with something, and I understand that, but for the most part the trans community stays pretty secretive, they want to go into the closet and stay there. And that’s completely understandable there. They don’t identify as trans, they identify as their actual gender, which is perfectly understandable. The only issue there is because they’re not out, it can cause issues down the road when someone finds out that they are trans and that’s where what I’m trying to do at least is going to come in hopefully, which is changing what’s available to us. Yeah, it’s a pretty good size community, it’s just you only see the surface of it. You don’t see all of it.

AU: So what is your position in the Perpetual Transitions group?

SS: I’m one of the facilitators of the group right now.

AU: So what do you do as a facilitator of the group?

SS: That’s a very loaded question. I do a lot and nothing at all, so for the most part when everything is running smoothly I don’t really do anything, let everybody else do what they are there to do, for the most part we are a social support group so a lot of our time is spent on discussion, just what’s going on this week, if we have a presenter come in they’ll talk about that. The big thing for us when it’s running smoothly is it allows more time to work on outreach portion of things which is going out and educating people about topics, specifically government officials, medical officials, and the like. When it’s not running smoothly we do a lot of one on one work with people. The bulk of us have at least some background in therapy or social work, so it kind of relies a little on that, but we’re trying to keep it very minimalistic on the therapeutic side of things though. It’s not therapy, it’s just there is a therapy tent to it.

AU: How receptive have government officials and other…

SS: In my experience, and keep in mind I haven’t done a lot of work with Memphis directly, I usually go straight to the national level, I met with a couple DOJ officials, met with a few state officials, but for the most part I kind of stay away from the local, it’s not a stay away, it’s that I haven’t had an issue with the local yet since I’ve been active and while I’m sure I will eventually, I haven’t had it yet so I really can’t comment on that one.

AU: Have you heard of the Transgender Political Coalition?

SS: Yes. I work with Marissa Richmond on some things, she’s the head of that, Vicky Davis, she runs Deval? She’s also part of TCPT. At Southern Comfort we actually met with the Department of Justice Chair for our entire Mid-South, Southeastern corner area, I think it’s district 4, I’m not sure on that one, but we met with him back in September, the Memphis side of things where they have the national, middle Tennessee, and there was a woman from Knoxville who didn’t want to attend the meeting but I gave her information to Marissa who is pretty much the state, she’ll run around the entire state.
**AU:** What is Southern Comfort?

**SS:** Southern Comfort Conference is the Transgender Conference there in Atlanta, it’s been going on for twenty-one years now, a lot of it is seminars, information, but at the same time it’s also a big party for people who are firmly in the closet, will never get to leave the closet unless they come out, it’s a place where they can go and actually be themselves for a few days and go back in for the next year. And for some people they absolutely need that. For others it’s just an informational circuit, a chance to actually enjoy Atlanta, if you live in somewhere kind of like Memphis where you have a choice of two gay clubs and one of them is really, really bad, and one of them is a former strip club. I’m not a big fan of clubs here in Memphis, I usually stick to pubs, bars. There are a few that are gay friendly, my favorite would be Tracks, it’s actually owned by two gay men. RP Tracks, RP Billiards, they are both on Highland and Walker, or what’s the other cross street, it changes names, Walker, Southern and something else. It’s a college bar that’s owned by gay guys so it’s pretty gay friendly. Pretty much anything here in Mid-Town is pretty gay friendly. There are exceptions, but for the most part. Let me rephrase that, “queer friendly” [laughs]. I always use ‘gay’ as ‘queer’ and I really need to get better at that. For the most part, there are places you can go for sure here in town that are really nice to hang out.

**AU:** I don’t mean to keep going back to this, we can move on, but I’m interested in your religious views having been Mormon.

**SS:** Like I said, I don’t really have any one particular religious view anymore. Not really, say if I can blame that or if that has something to do with Mormonism, being LDS whatever, I think that’s has more to do with that I really like science, I really take what I see at face value. The reason I claim I’m agnostic is because there are some things that I just can’t explain. Science can’t explain them. Things that have happened to me, happened to friends that I’m just like, there’s no way that happens and this person survived. Or there’s no way that happened and this happened, too. One of those was a really, really bad car wreck I was in, and I walked away completely unscratched. No way in hell that happened. It was just impossible, all things considered. I got caught between two semis and ran into a telephone pole. No one was injured at all in that wreck. My car was destroyed. There were pieces missing completely, like, the trunk was gone, don’t know where it went, it was just gone. They wrecked into my gas pump, which should have ignited. It didn’t. Car was on fire. Wasn’t anywhere that had any kind of fuel or anything burnable except plastic. There was a TV because I was helping a friend move when this wreck happened in the passenger’s seat. It destroyed the middle console, destroyed the entire passenger and tore off the back half of my seat [laughs]. Physically, I got hit on the driver’s side even, they hit right on the driver’s side door, crushed it in and removed it as it pulled away. We found my glasses while we were sorting through the wreck stuff and they were across the street next to my driver’s side mirror, my air bags didn’t deploy, and I hit a telephone pole head on. I was sixteen, seventeen. I’d just recently gotten my driver’s license and ended up totalizing two semis and my car. One of the semis was pulling a horse trailer, not a single horse was injured, which is next to impossible, the only injury slash causality was a chicken that was crossing the road. I was out in Lafayette County, which is rural slash urban, somewhere in the middle there, and so there was farm land at the intersection where I crashed. So it made sense for there to be a chicken on the road, but it’s the funniest aspect of all that. The chicken crossed the road and
died. That’s one, it’s just like there’s no way in hell I walked away from that without a scratch, with my phone still in my hand so I could actually call the cops, it was just a next to impossible situation and I shouldn’t have walked away from it period. The fact that I did means at least to me that there’s something, don’t really know what it is, but there’s something that has some kind of plan. Found out later that I’ve actually died four times as a child, so I’m not really sure if there’s some kid of plan or not, but if there is I’m not supposed to die yet.

AU: Sounds like there is. What kind of messages did you receive from the Mormon church?

SS: Basically, around that time when I was figuring out was the time that—how much do you know about LDS Mormonism?

AU: Not very much. I had a friend who was Mormon…

SS: Do you know the kind of infrastructure…

AU: Yes.

SS: About that time, the prophet came out and said that homosexuality was a sin, the re-affirmation of it, the first one happened, I think in the eighties, but this one was the really, really big one that came out and it was by the same guy that was behind a lot of prop 8, so it had a lot of weight on me and I was like, ‘OK that’s not going to work out very well is it?’ I quickly started going through a theological survey trying to figure out what fit for me because that one was not going to work. I had, I don’t know if it was belief in those things but I felt that if there was something that there’s probably very similar to the way—I don’t really know how to explain that—Mormonism is Christianity, but it’s kind of Christianity mixed with a lot of science at one hand, I think if I were ever to be really religious it might be something similar to Mormonism, there just wasn’t much that agreed with that other than Mormonism and I couldn’t be that, so I was like, ‘OK I’m going to stick to the science element of it.’ By then I had already decided that I was going to be a Physiologist that’s specifying in human anatomy and mortuary science, so basically an ME, Forensic Anthropologist, whatever you want to call it, that’s where I was going, had few experiences with it prior, for some reason my elementary school was insane and we went on all sorts of odd field trips and one of those was to a morgue where we got to help dissect things. We stuck to the animals that came in alongside things, but we got to see a full on autopsy. I was nine. It was an elementary school in Dallas, Texas, public. I ended up having to dissect, we each got an animal, I ended up with a cat and most people didn’t want to dissect a kitty but I was like, ‘I will.’ So like for three hours I’m sitting there mimicking a lot of what I just saw and I’m like I really enjoying this. Mad scientist in the making. My hair was long and all sticking up because it was really hot, but yeah. So I knew science was going to be part of my life. That’s changed. No much, but it’s still very much there. I’m like, this is research this is science. If I can’t see facts or proof or understand someone’s motivation or understanding of something, I’m usually going to question the hell out of it, so that’s where I’m at with religion.

AU: What do you like about Memphis?
SS: It’s Memphis. Seriously that’s about it. It’s Memphis. I love Memphis, I’m not really sure why. It feels the most place like home. There’s no real tie to Memphis whatsoever, but at the same time, I feel this connection to Memphis. I want to stay in Memphis to try to make it a better place. As far as liking it, I despise it. I want to see it become something better. Until that happens, I hate Memphis. There are some things about it that I really appreciate, really enjoy. I really love the climate here. I really like that it’s surrounded by water for some reason and that if you really want to go somewhere it’s right in the center of everything. If you want to go to Atlanta, six hours away. Dallas, eight hours away. Chicago, six and a half if you’re speeding. D.C., about ten hours if you’re really speeding. Still, there’s a lot of places you can go really quickly from Memphis and I kind of enjoy that.

AU: If you got to move anywhere, where would be your ideal place?

SS: If I had the chance to leave Memphis and had the inclination to leave Memphis, there would be a lot of conditionals into that situation like work, what I would be doing, how long would I have to stay, probably be Dallas. I really like Dallas, too. My major is education with a focus in pre-law, there’s a good law school there, educators are paid the highest in the country there. Dallas has a really, really, really big LGBT community. So rather than just feeling like one in maybe twenty facilitators who are trying to help, I would feel like one in 20,000 people who are committed to helping, so it’s kind a like—[laughs].

AU: So you wouldn’t’ leave the South?

SS: I’ve been to New York, I love New York don’t get me wrong. I love Chicago, I kind of really like Portland. I would never go back to Portland. It’s nice, but no. I like Atlanta. I really like Atlanta. It’s very similar to Memphis, a little bit warmer, I’m not really big on that but it’s nice. I would move somewhere bigger because I would want to feel like one of many instead of one in a few. So that I feel compelled to be a workaholic in some things, which kind of builds on itself. I would not want to live in Los Angeles. I would die, the smog would probably kill me in a few weeks. I’m very asthmatic and I actually don’t have to take my medication here in Memphis, Dallas, or Atlanta, but once every few months, whereas, it’s a much lesser need so that’s why I kind of like living near here. LA would kill me. The smog alone, just actually having to go out in it for a day or two.

AU: And another big reason is to help make Memphis a better place?

SS: Yea, I actually feel a compulsion to work here in Memphis and see what, if anything, I can do. I worry sometimes that I’m going to get burnt out. I’ve been having those thoughts a little bit recently because of some other things, but, and most of my family’s here, so then there’s that aspect of—if I don’t get away from Memphis some things there with family are going to be more difficult if it ever came down to, I had to cut them out to really be myself, I might have to move away just to be myself, but for the most part Memphis is Memphis and that’s home.

AU: Do you think your family will ever come around?
SS: In full, no. my sister, maybe eventually. I think she will come around. My mom, she claims she loves me regardless, so I’m going to stick with that assumption for now and then go from there. If it gets worse, it gets worse. If it gets better, yay. But right now I’m just kind of apprehensive to the change on that one. Planning for the worst, hoping for the best.

AU: Where were you when you didn’t have a home?

SS: That month, I stayed with a lot of friends, a lot of family. My grandmother for a lot of it, just went completely in the closet for that then came home, just went from there. When it actually happened I was actually supposed to be moving away the next week, like, completely up to Portland for an internship. And it didn’t happen. It was going to be a fully paid internship and basically the firm evaporated over night about a week prior to that so it was like ‘boom, boom.’ Kind of spiraled into a depression there for a little bit. Came back out pretty much as I am now. Much more workaholic now, but stronger I think for it.

AU: How might attitudes towards transgenders have changed since you’ve been in Memphis, or have they?

SS: Duanna Johnson, that’s going to be the big thing here. That happened about that same time I was really getting involved with the community at first. That was one of the tipping points that really I was like, I can’t just sit by and do nothing any more. I know that if I get involved I’m going to give myself over one hundred percent to making this thing better. Prior to it I was like, I just want to get done with transitioning and be full time completely. It was about the same time that I was realizing, OK, I’m pre-med now I really, really, really don’t want to be pre-med though I really want to go and make the world better, and being a doctor, I’m not doing that. I’m going to be working on one patient at a time and even then, not a lot I can do outside of that patient, so educator and law, that’s where the next two things came in at and it was, like, how can I help the world the best and still actually just go back in the closet, not actually have to worry about things, and that’s where that came in, and then started dating Ben who is the relationship that I mentioned earlier. Everything started to come into place and I started to come out more, started working Stonewall, reconnected with my friend Ashley who became president of Stonewall, just a bunch of little things happened right there, and for the most part, the attitudes I’ve faced here in Memphis have been moderate. I haven’t run into complete and utter, ‘Oh, that’s just something that’s abominable,’ however, I don’t hang out with people that are Bellevue or First Baptist or, yeah, there’s like a whole list of people, a whole list of religious organizations that as a rule I stay away from. Where I work now, Bellevue actually has a standing meeting every Wednesday. For the most part I’ve actually dealt with them pretty well. They haven’t made any direct comments either at me or about something in my presence. The second they do I’m going to get fired. Which is really sad because I’m getting a promotion next week which is really nice actually, I get it tomorrow. I forgot about that. I have to go in for training tomorrow at eight. But yeah, the second they do I’m going to lose my job. My boss is gay, but even then if I go all out yelling at this person who runs this group its going to be really hard to come back from that.

AU: What about First Congo? Have you worked with them?
SS: I work with First Congo tangentially, them and IC, Immaculate Conception, but for the most part I’m not religious any more. It’s like this thing with Christmas, it’s everywhere now and I’m like if I were really going to celebrate something it would be tomorrow, Wednesday, with the solstice. That’s just kind of where I’m at these days. I mean, everything is set around the solstice so why not just celebrate the day of solstice, why xyz, pick your religion, there’s a holiday. I honestly can’t think of any religion that doesn’t. Right around now it’s like, yeah, just celebrate the day of—

AU: So you talked earlier about working to incorporate transgenders in the community and public policy. What would you like to see changed?

SS: I really want to see a national law come through, just something on the national level that says, ‘hey, these people exist. Hey, this is the process for which social security is going to work now as far as transgender people, it’s going to be very authoritative like you have to jump through sixteen hoops, but something on a national level come through, then from there everything has to adhere to the national level and that actually be part of it as, ‘yes we do believe in state’s rights, but this is people’s rights and states are trying to take away people’s rights protected by the constitution, so no you have to actually adhere to our social security law,’ is kind of what I’d like to see come through.

AU: What about birth certificate changes?

SS: Fortunately I wasn’t born in Tennessee. I was born in Arkansas, which is actually surprisingly one of the few states that allows you to change it with just your signature. You don’t actually need, they prefer a psychiatric evaluation of some kind, but for the most part they’re actually one of the most lenient states which is really, really surprising. You usually need to go through a full legal procedure. With Arkansas you write out a letter and fill out an application and the judge overlooks it and usually decides if you need a psychiatric evaluation and then they go from there.

AU: Where in Arkansas are you from?

SS: I am from Hope, Arkansas. Well, I was born at the March of Dimes Hospital there in Hot Springs. The four deaths, two of them were actually instantaneously after birth, I was pulled from my mother dead and they managed to revive me. Then I died once more that night and the second time was when I was two. But, yeah, Hot Springs. As far as other legal things I might be interested in changing, how familiar are you with Special Access to Discriminate, SAD act? That’s the one that disabled cities from being able to pass non-discrimination clauses. Memphis and Shelby County cannot get one. That’s what I would like to see disappear. Would like to see the ‘don’t say gay’ bill disappear. I’d like to see that just up and vanish. And then I would kind of like to see a statewide or even a nationwide non-discrimination act… I’d like to see one for work, one that encompasses everything, but I don’t think we are going to see that at least in the next five hundred and nine years. We might. We might see it this next election. I doubt it, but it would be nice.

AU: Do you feel like there’s a movement happening in Memphis? A push for rights?
SS: Yes and no. How well do you know Jonathon Cole? There does exist the movement. TEP (Tennessee Equality Project). It’s very hard to comment on that one. For every step we take forward we generally take two steps back in something else. One of our biggest supporters, Steve Mulroy actually made a comment very similar to that a few months back when Christ Church Health Center (Christ Community Health Center) took title X funding from Planned Parenthood, which I’m not really sure how to word my disgust at that.

AU: Are they still able to function?

SS: They can function, it’s just a much smaller things they have to work with now. Because that’s a lot of their funding is title X.

AU: Who took that away?

SS: Christ Health Center. If you’re LGBT they won’t see you. If you’re there for an abortion, they’re not going to do anything for you. I do a lot of work with Choices. So I do work within that side of the community there, so it’s just like, there’s kind of a lot of bleed over there. I think there’s actually a Planned Parenthood poster right there. So yeah, we do work with them and they work with us, and it’s, for everything socially that we get, we lose two other things, and it’s a real problem. And I do think that there is a movement pushing to change that. It’s just not going all that well right now. Something either on the city or state level, we get hurt or we get something, and it’s just like, ‘sigh.’ I don’t really know where we’re going from here now. We’re just kind floating in there. I think it’s just going to take something national to really change what’s going on here in Tennessee, Memphis especially, but what that is, no idea.

[End Shughart].
Appendix: O
Appendix O: Interview with Edward Wiley

This is my interview with twenty-four year old black gay male and bank teller Edward Wiley who was kind enough to meet with me at the MGLCC on his birthday, January 11, 2012. The interview lasted forty-five minutes.

AU: What do you do here in Memphis?

EW: I’m a teller. It’s really weird because I always hated math. Now I’m a teller. Really want to get back into journalism.

AU: Are you from Memphis?

EW: I’m from West Memphis. Right across the bridge. But I live in Memphis now.

AU: Are you gay, bisexual?

EW: Gay.

AU: Could you tell me about coming out?

EW: Coming out was probably the hardest part. I always worked with a lot of youth and I talked to them about being who they were and for me it took me a long time, not to come to terms with it, but to build up enough strength to tell my mom because I would always, I told her I was bi when I was in high school and then that was just, I wouldn’t say a cover up, because I was still dating females, just not full on. I just wasn’t aware of all that I knew now. So that was, I think I was twenty-two when I told her that I was gay because she already knew, but I had to tell her myself instead of having her assume. So it was kind of a struggle because, like I said, I talked to a lot of children, a lot of teenagers, telling them, ‘Live your life. Be who you are,’ and not worry about what other people do, and I was doing the same thing, I just hadn’t told my mom, so that was the end all of all, just a relief. And she was like, ‘I’m going to love you anyway,’ and it was like, ‘What? Why didn’t I do this earlier?’ And so that’s even a struggle now in my professional life because I don’t go out broadcasting that. My friends say, ‘Oh, you don’t tell people, so you’re in the closet’. I’m not in the closet. I just don’t feel the need to tell everyone outside of, you know, close friends, my mom. My dad, haven’t talked to him about it because he’s not the type of person that I can just sit down and have conversation with. So that was a big struggle mentally.

AU: Do you feel like Memphis is a welcoming place for LGBTs?

EW: Not all parts of Memphis. As a whole, it’s not as progressive as other larger cities. I do see more people being not accustomed to it, I don’t want to say getting used to it, but becoming more aware that the community is here and that’s it not going anywhere and I think Midtown is, like, super equality and everything like that, but there’s certain parts where you go where it’s like you see people whispering or you can see it in their eyes, ‘Ooh, that’s a gay guy’ or ‘That’s a lesbian’ or something. So I think I will say that in the near future maybe not like two years from
now but sooner or later it will be a more progressive city because it’s a rapid pace, we have a lot of political influences that are LGBTQ friendly. So I do see it becoming more friendly, more aware.

AU: What do you like about Memphis?

EW: The biggest thing that I like about Memphis is that there are so many opportunities, because you have different outlets for your career, your professional life, your personal life, your spiritual life. There’s a diverse group of people any group you go, you’re not always going to see the same type of person everywhere. And there’s just so much to offer here to me. I just love it. It’s hard to put it in words because it’s so…It’s almost a perfect size. Not a lot of people, not too small, sometimes it can feel like it, but I love it. A lot of people don’t but I love it to death.

AU: How old are you?

EW: I’m twenty-four today.

AU: Do you go to church?

EW: I attend a church in Memphis. I used to go to a church in West Memphis but now I go, I just joined actually the weekend before New Years. New Direction.

AU: What denomination is it?

EW: It’s mostly non-denominational. We do have, it’s more like a Bible church, so it’s more towards Bible believing, not necessarily Baptist, but they do Baptize, but it’s New Direction Christian Church. You come as who you are. You don’t come as a label.

AU: Why did you choose that church?

EW: I chose that church because it’s more, they meet people where they are, it’s not so pointing fingers like other churches are. It’s more like you come and wear whatever you want to wear, like street clothes, but not too revealing, but you wear jeans, shorts sometimes, and my old church, you couldn’t do that at all. You wear jeans and people look at you like, ‘Oh my God. What are you doing?’ This one is more relaxed, and the pastor, he’s younger, and he’s all about reaching out to that one person that’s not necessarily in the church, so he’d rather meet them than a whole group of people who, you know, strict religion. So he preaches about—now we are in this thing of becoming a disciple instead of just being a member. And I appreciate that because I was always heavily involved in church. So now trying to get involved in learning to pray on my own, I’ve always done it, but never done it to where I’ve taken myself to a new spiritual level, and so now I see myself growing spiritually and I appreciate that about the church.

AU: What church were you raised in?

EW: I was raised in a Baptist church. And in Little Rock I went to a Methodist church, which was a big difference, but the pastor was raised Pentecostal, so it was kind of like a melting pot of
all into one church, so that was a real good experience for me. Then I went to a non-denominational church before I moved to New Direction, so I’ve been across the gamut.

AU: Does it matter to you if some are Open and Affirming or have the welcoming title?

EW: The church that I was at in Arkansas, I believed it to be affirming, and I think it was more so affirming at first until a lot of things happened and then things got heated between me and the pastor, and it was like struggle for me to be who I was and that’s ultimately the reason why I left the church, and so it’s a big part of my decision making when I go to a church whether they preach, ‘You’re going to hell because you’re gay’ or, ‘Gay is the biggest sin of them all’ or, ‘Men shouldn’t wear pink.’ That’s a big factor if I decide I’m going to stay at a church or I’m going to leave a church, so. I’ve been called out in churches, I’ve been like talked down to in church. I was like, ‘Whoa, you know, I’m not the only gay guy in here. I’m more out but not the only one,’ and so have a really crazy relationship with church [laughs].

AU: What happened at the Methodist church?

EW: The Methodist church was more like my church now because they had old, young, progressive, and he tried to mix everyone to make them comfortable, so he wouldn’t speak out against homosexuality, but he didn’t make it seem like it’s the worst thing ever. He would say some things, but then you could talk to him about it and he was willing to hear your side of, so I love that. I’ve been to some who were like, ‘Get out of my office.’ ‘You can’t even listen to what I have to say?’

AU: Was that the church where it got heated between you and the pastor?

EW: No, that was the church in West Memphis. It kind of got heated because there were a couple of teenagers. I was over the teenage group, it wasn’t Bible study but it was before you went to bible study. So I guess he believed that I was teaching them that it was OK to be gay because I guess one of the students went to him and said that they might be gay, or they think about, you know, like things that teenagers do, they have questions. And so nobody ever came to me and asked me questions about my personal life. I always talked to them about, you know, some things that were personal, but never dealing with me and another man or me and my friends. It was more of life experiences or experiences that other people had, dealing with the issues that related to them. I would never mention anything dealing with sexuality, so when he came to me I was caught off guard. And so there was an issue with me and him physically, not a fight or anything but it was more, you know, physical like that. And I was like, when he said, it just took me back. Like, when I said I was growing spiritually, I was taking like six steps back. And it caught me off guard when I thought the church was affirming and the next thing you know he starts talking more and more about sexuality and ‘I’m going to pray this out of you,’ and this, this, and that, and I’m like, ‘Well, you are just with such and such, so how are you going to tell somebody else not to when you’re doing it?’ So that kind of just caught me way off guard.

AU: When did you discover the center her?
EW: When I came back in 2010. I moved back and one of my friends introduced me to the 3MB sessions here, and after that I worked closely with one of the representatives and then we threw, I was on the board for a party and after that I just kept coming back, kept coming back, so. I came to get tested one time. Because I had moved away and then once I came back I got tested, and once I got tested it was more of, like, ‘Let me learn more about the center,’ so I came around more often. I started, well, I signed up to volunteer recently, but I would do stuff for parades and for Pride and stuff like that, so it was about June 2010.

AU: Have you lived in any other places with a gay and lesbian community center?

EW: Besides Little Rock, no. Not that I know of. I’ve only lived in Memphis, West Memphis, Little Rock, and Arkadelphia, and there’s nothing in Arkadelphia [laughs]. So this is the most progressive of them all. Little Rock is really good, too. I love their center, but it’s mostly youth oriented. And not as much as adults or anybody, the whole gamut of the LGBT community, it’s more youth.

AU: Has the center played an important role in your life?

EW: The center, definitely has. We have a group on Sundays when we meet and just get a different outlook on, like, I had it easy coming out compared to a lot of other people, and so when I think about my story, even though I thought it was like the roughest thing that I’ve dealt with, hearing about people being put out of their homes, or being beaten, saying it was going to be beaten out of you, it was like, ‘Oh, wow.’ You’re introduced to the dark side of coming out. Even though I thought mine was dark, it was pretty day light compared to tot their. So the center helped me realize that, you know, it’s not about me because it was all about how I can advance myself, how can I do this. I see all the kids, I see all the kids and I’m like, well, I’m only twenty-four and I’m coming to grips with myself, and I see other people like in their thirties and forties and their just coming to the center, they’re like, ‘I just came out,’ or, ‘I’m just starting to realize that I may be gay.’ Wow. It’s so different here. So different.

AU: Different here at the center?

EW: Different here at the center because I didn’t even know it was here. Like, all the times I would come to Memphis when I was younger, like, nineteen, twenty, didn’t know it was here, so when I found out it was here it was like an eye opener because it helped me become more comfortable with myself seeing that I wasn’t the only one dealing with certain issues and that I could live my life and not be afraid because when I would come to Memphis before I was more of, like, a night time gay, like, when parties are going on or at the club. So now it’s like I’m not afraid to walk out and have to be so stern in my walk and talk a certain way. So it’s a freedom, it introduced me to freedom.

AU: How well would you say the white LGBT and black LGBT community is integrated?

EW: I think it’s a big separation because a lot of people in the African American community don’t know about the center. They’re so used to being a midnight gay or dealing with their certain group of friends, and, so, when they started the group on Sundays it opened up the doors
to more African Americans and people now know about the center and hopefully gets more people involved, because a the Mid-South Pride, I was overwhelmed by the diversity of the people there, the different, the Hispanic community, the African American community, the Caucasian, everyone was all together, and when I was standing at the booth for the center you could see everyone coming over and they’re like, ‘Oh OK, you have HIV testing, you do this, you do this, oh really?’ So I see it moving, but right now it’s still pretty separated when it comes to, like, groups, events that come on, and its almost disheartening because you really want everyone to come tougher, but sometimes it’s just not, you’re not able to do it overnight, but hopefully it will get better. We are trying to get different groups to come around, and not necessarily come for one event and then leave and never come back again, try to get repetitive volunteering, donations and stuff like that.

**AU:** What else do you do here at the center?

**EW:** I volunteer from time to time, but I just really started as an official volunteer, but me and Martavius are really good friends so whenever he’s doing something I try to help out, but now I really want to start doing more, I’m not necessarily a good front door person, but, like, when they go out and do like outreach and stuff, I really want to start helping with stuff like that, to help the center because it helped me out. And I see it helping other people in ways that I couldn’t benefit from, but everybody can benefit from something at the center.

**AU:** Have you been to Black Gay Pride here?

**EW:** I’ve been to plenty, plenty, plenty, and it seems like that’s definitely separated because even though Mid-South Gay Pride, anybody can come, it seems like at the Black Gay Pride it’s more of, like, let’s say a Hispanic guy comes in, they may be like, ‘Oh, what’s he doing here?,’ but they won’t necessarily make him uncomfortable, but it will be, like, ‘woo,’ something different, so especially, like a white guy comes in a white girl, it’s more like they kind of look at them kind of funny because a lot of them are younger or they’re older with a younger mind set, so it’s like, it’s kind of rough because I brought a white friend one time and we just got constant stares and constant looks and it’s like, it’s just another person, and I didn’t realize it was going be such a big deal because, you know, a lot of people they, work with different races, but when it comes to the club it’s like, ‘this is my club’ like, ‘Why are you here? We don’t come to yours.’ And I’m like, this is different, not 1960, so anybody can come in.

**AU:** Do you feel like it’s important, though, for black gay visibility?

**EW:** I definitely think so because in our community it’s still taboo, but people do know, because everybody, well not everybody, but most people have a cousin, a brother or sister or something, that’s gay, they might not be out, but they do still have someone. So for the community I think it’s important to have those faces, not just when you go out to just have like six white people go out, try to diversify it anywhere you go because it’s kind of hard when you’re just looking at one type of person and you’re like, ‘I can’t relate to that person,’ and so different color faces would definitely help out. But, like I said, it’s harder to get people to commit to something that doesn’t benefit them. And that’s what all races, when it comes to, like with the Pride it’s kind of hard to get them to, I know they had a struggle with getting them to work with the Mid South Pride
instead of just having a black gay pride, to just have one unified pride, but I don’t know if that will ever happen. I’m trying to stay optimistic about it and I thought it would happen this year but it was a failure.

AU: What challenges might you face as a black gay man in Memphis?

EW: The biggest challenge is dealing with other black gay men because everything’s so, everyone is out for themselves, so it’s not like a big unity thing. They’re not known in the community, so it’s like, ‘Who are you? Why are you talking to me?’ And so the biggest struggle is trying to unify the community as a whole, not necessarily just the black gay community, but the LGBT community all together because it’s, like I said it’s definitely separated, but that’s my biggest struggle because I really don’t too much deal with the church because I go to church, I’m fine with my church, I don’t visit others, but a lot of people will say church, but it’s not for me because I can have church by myself at home

AU: Is church predominantly black?

EW: It’s predominantly black but we do have different ethnicities at the church, and he wants more, but there is enough. They have, I guess [unintelligible] there’s a Hispanic version of the church about three miles down the street, so when I went I did see, you know, different colors in the audience, so that to me was like, ‘Wow,’ you know, I’ve never been to a church that had like different types like that except, you know, visiting other churches, but none where they were members and vocal members

AU: Would you say you identify more with one part of yourself more than one the other?

EW: I don’t do one more than the other because, like, I always say at the end of the day I’m just Eddie, so it’s, like, not a lot of label I’ve placed on myself. So, a lot of my other friends will say, ‘Oh, so, you know, you’re black first and you do this,’ or ‘You’re gay first and you do this,’ but I’m like, ‘No, I’m just Eddie.’ So I don’t identify more with one more than the other because at any time, if one happens to come up more, still going to represent for both because I’m still both. I can’t turn off one and then turn on the other, but I know a lot of people that are like, ‘I’m a black gay male,’ ” ‘I’m a gay black man,’ I’m like, ‘It doesn’t matter which you put first, you’re still going to be both [laughs]. It’s funny how people think and you just sit there and laugh. I’m like, ‘Oh, OK.’…

[We get into a discussion about E. Patrick Johnson and Black Gay Men of the South]

EW: To me, I’ve heard of him, I’ve heard him speak before, (E. Patrick Johnson)…but a majority of the community is going to be closeted because maybe you know, sequestered from the rest of their family, their job, church, and they really treasure those things to where they don’t want to put themselves in danger, at risk of not totally coming out or not dealing with their sexuality and that brings up anger, that brings up promiscuity, and other things like that, and I have plenty of friends that won’t say like, ‘Oh, I’m out,’ and they are on the down low or whatever and they do think that white men have more of a privilege, but to me, you have the same opportunity because you don’t know their struggle because you’re stuck in your circle and you think, ‘Oh, I had it hard so all black people have it hard and I see all these white people out
in the community and they’re out so they had it easy.’ I’m like ‘uh uh,’ a lot of my friends that are white got kicked out of their house or they were ban from their church or, you know, their families disowned them just like the black community. It’s just, you have to be open to learn about other communities outside of you won circle. So to me, I don’t want to say that it’s easy, of course it’s not, but from my eye sight, it’s like you have the same opportunities if you want to be true to yourself, who you are, and not worry about, ‘Oh, is somebody going to call me gay or call me a sissy?’, because now we’re seeing, you know, there are more masculine men that are gay. Not all gay men are considered sissies or drag queens, so that’s a big struggle that I had when I was younger, because didn’t want to come out because I had two cousins, one on each side, like my mom’s side and dad’s side and they were flamboyant, and so I was like, ‘Nah, I ain’t gay, I’m not gay. They’re so gay, they’re so feminine, they’re girls,’ and now it’s like I’ve come to realize that I’m still a man and I think, I hope they realized that they were still men. But even though they were flamboyant I still respect them now more than I did then because I was so anti-gay when I was younger, and it was only because I was in denial because I knew I was from as long as I can remember. I remember playing with dolls, designing clothes, and I thought ‘Hmm, little boys don’t do this’ [laughs]. So, I was like maybe I’m a little, maybe I’m not so manly, so I was more effeminate when I was younger and I’m still not a thug, thug, man’s man, but I’m still a man at the end of the day and my struggle now is finding my own identity. And even though I say I’m Eddie sometimes I’m like, ‘Oh, it’s OK to be feminine here, you have to masculine here,’ and most of the time you can’t always be Eddie, you have to butch it up sometimes even though I hate to do it, but at the end of the day it’s inevitable. There are some places where you go, you can’t be, you know, flaming, but that’s, hopefully, like I said, that will change because you need to be who you are wherever. You don’t see a straight guy out saying, ‘Oh I have to be this way, I have to be straight, I have to do this, I have to do that’. They just live they’re life. Struggle.

[End Wiley].
VITA

Amy Catherine Ulmer was born August 19, 1988 to Richard and Minna Ulmer in El Dorado, Arkansas. She attended El Dorado High School, graduating in the top 10% of her class in 2006. Amy then moved to Conway, Arkansas where she graduated from Hendrix College with a Bachelor of Arts in American Studies in 2010. In August of that year, Amy began the Southern Studies Master’s program at the University of Mississippi, earning an assistantship at Living Blues Magazine where she currently works.