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# TRANS MISSISSIPPI

A Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in the School of Journalism  
The University of Mississippi

Jessi Hotakainen

May 2016



## ABSTRACT

This is the accompanying paper to the documentary thesis *Trans Mississippi*, which explores the lives of two transgender individuals living in Mississippi. It outlines the theoretical underpinnings, as well as the director's methodology in producing the film and its justification.

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## JUSTIFICATION

The overall goal of this documentary project was to raise awareness about the transgender community in Mississippi. I want the viewer to come away with a basic understanding of what it means for a person to be born with physical characteristics that conflict with their gender identity, how difficult it is to transition in Mississippi and how underrepresented and unprotected their community is. As a note, I will be using the word trans, which is an acceptable substitute for transgender, throughout this paper.<sup>i</sup>

Recently, the media has spotlighted a few celebrity individuals that identify as transgender. For example, Caitlyn Jenner, a former Olympic athlete, and Laverne Cox, star of the Netflix show *Orange is the New Black*, have garnered a great deal of attention. However beneficial this exposure may be for the trans community, it does nothing to reveal the struggles that everyday trans Americans face. Jenner's experience in particular is in stark contrast to all of the trans Mississippians I spoke with. Her celebrity and financial situation have removed many barriers that others cannot overcome. Not everyone gets to come out on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. Most trans people struggle to afford hormone replacement therapy and only dream of surgery.<sup>ii</sup>

The justification for the project is that there has not been any real exploration of the trans community in Mississippi. I will not be able to cover all the issues the trans community faces across the state. However, I will be able to focus on two people, Leah Walton and Tanisa/ Daniel Jenkins, who present a diverse portion of the community as a whole. Both only 20-years-old, they are simultaneously dealing with the universal challenges of being young, while navigating

the complexity of gender identity. Moreover, they are doing so in an environment that promotes oppression and discrimination over education and equality.

In 2013, Leah Walton began her transition from male to female during her senior year of high school in Batesville, Miss. This included wearing women's clothing. A group of students formed a protest against her, claiming that she was violating the school's dress code and thereby receiving special treatment.

According to an article in the Huffington Post, the group disobeyed the dress code by arriving to school dressed in gym shorts and sweatpants.<sup>iii</sup> Another article, from *the Gloss*, reported that some students were wearing T-shirts with slogans saying “abomination.”<sup>iv</sup>

The American Civil Liberties Union, an organization that provides legal defense to marginalized groups, stepped in to assist Walton, and, eventually, the school relented that she was not breaking any rules. At a time when trans issues were almost non-existent in the media, the issue gained a lot of exposure, including articles in the U.S. and in the United Kingdom's *Daily Mail*.<sup>v</sup>

In March, she received a Heroism award from the Memphis-based Women of Achievement coalition for her behavior during the ordeal.<sup>vi</sup> Although she doesn't feel like a hero, looking back she can see how her transitioning helped pave the way for others.

"I received many messages from people thanking me for doing what I did and telling me how much it helped them," Walton said. "I just did what I had to do to survive."

The other subject of the documentary is Tanisa/ Daniel Jenkins. He is currently finishing a general studies degree at Northwest Mississippi Community College in Senatobia, Miss.

Jenkins, who went to high school with Walton, saw how badly people reacted during her transition. Since many of the students he graduated from high school with attend Northwest, he feels safer waiting until after graduation to begin his transition. For this reason, he still uses his birth name, Tanisa, as well as female pronouns. However, because he identifies as male, for the purpose of this project I will use male pronouns.

Jenkins brought an important aspect to this project because he is a trans person of color. A 2011 discrimination study conducted by The National Center for Transgender Equality, reported that African American transgender respondents faired much worse than all others in most of the areas examined. One of the issues the trans community faces is a high level of violence.<sup>vii</sup>

"I have to be very careful about what I say and what I do. I've had people call up my family or post things online that are hateful. I don't want to hurt anyone," he said.

Through their own words, both Walton and Jenkins provide insightful to what it is like to be transgender in Mississippi. Each story is diverse and invaluable to this project.



## DEFINITIONS

The word transgender is frequently used to describe a broad range of identities. It is an umbrella term that can refer to the experiences of anyone who falls outside of the traditional understanding of gender.<sup>viii</sup>

The word transsexual is often confused with the word transgender. A transsexual is a person having a strong desire to assume the physical characteristics and gender roles of the opposite sex. In addition, transsexual is considered a clinical term because it refers to a person who has undergone hormone treatment and surgery to attain the physical characteristics of the opposite sex.<sup>ix</sup> The key difference is that someone may identify as transgender and not wish to pursue hormone treatment or surgery.<sup>x</sup>

Many individuals view gender identity as a spectrum, some may cross-dress part of the time, be gender variant, or gender nonconforming. Gender variant, or gender nonconformity, is a when a person's gender identity is neither male nor female.<sup>xi</sup>

Furthermore, some people identify outside the traditional gender binary (meaning they identify as something other than male or female), or they can feel they are both, neither or some mixture thereof. In essence, not everyone who does not conform to gender stereotypes identifies as transgender.<sup>xii</sup>

However, for the purpose of this project, when using the word transgender, I am referring specifically to people whose gender identity does not correspond to that person's biological sex

assigned at birth.<sup>xiii</sup> As a note, the term cisgender relates to a person whose gender identity corresponds with that person's biological sex assigned at birth.<sup>xiv</sup>

In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association replaced the term "Gender Identity Disorder" with "Gender Dysphoria." The change came in part because using the word "disorder" stigmatized the term and, therefore, the community.<sup>xv</sup> The criteria for diagnosing this condition have also been updated to clarify that gender nonconformity is not a mental illness.<sup>xvi</sup>

It is important to note that some trans people do suffer negative mental health consequences from the disconnect between their bodies and identities and/or as a result of widespread discrimination and stereotyping.<sup>xvii</sup>

According to the American Civil Liberties Union, the word transition describes the social and sometimes medical process a trans person goes through to bring their lived experience into line with their gender identity.<sup>xviii</sup> In states with gender identity anti-discrimination laws, trans people who choose to undergo physical changes, are protected by law. For example, Massachusetts bars discrimination based on gender identity in employment and housing.<sup>xix</sup>

Some of the steps to transitioning can include changing the name and pronouns one goes by, updating formal documents to reflect a different gender marker and name from the one assigned at birth, changing one's style of dress, and/or pursuing hormone therapy. In some cases, it may also include gender confirmation surgery.<sup>xx</sup> This may involve surgery to change the shape of the face and throat, different types of genital reconstruction procedures, breast augmentation or reduction and removal of the uterus and ovaries or the testes.<sup>xxi</sup>

## WHAT IT MEANS TO BE TRANSGENDER IN THE UNITED STATES

The federal government does have a number of laws that protect transgender Americans, and has recently begun to take interest in promoting education about trans issues. In 2009, President Barack Obama signed the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crime Prevention Act.<sup>xxii</sup> According to the Human Rights Campaign, the act permits the government to provide grants and assistance to state and local authorities investigating and prosecuting hate crimes.<sup>xxiii</sup> Also in 2009, the FBI began accepting data on hate crimes related to gender identity.<sup>xxiv</sup>

However, where state and local law enforcement cannot or will not pursue these crimes, the federal government has no authority to ensure that justice will be sought.<sup>xxv</sup> Furthermore, the FBI relies on police departments from participating agencies to report hate crimes.<sup>xxvi</sup> Therefore, since Mississippi has no hate crime law regarding gender identity, the state's 75 participating agencies have no way of tracking or reporting these crimes.<sup>xxvii</sup>

An FBI report listed that there were only 98 hate crime incidents related to gender identity across America in 2014.<sup>xxviii</sup> This number is considerably lower than Sarah Warbelow, the legal director for Human Rights Campaign, believes it to be. In a 2015 interview with Quartz, Warbelow said that she hopes a clearer picture will emerge as the FBI continues to gather data. According to Quartz, this is only the second year that hate crimes involving gender identity have been reported by the FBI.<sup>xxix</sup>

Even if they are reported, hate crimes often go unprosecuted for a number of reasons. An article from the Anti-Defamation League, a civil rights agency, says that this is because they are generally more difficult to prove. The article claims that some prosecutors have expressed reluctance due to the additional evidentiary burden at trial.<sup>xxx</sup>

In 2015, a group of U.S. House lawmakers created a Transgender Equality Task Force and held their first forum in November. According to an article from the Public Broadcasting Service, the forum included a panelist of leaders in the movement for trans rights, who testified on how protections must involve an increase in education for law enforcement.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Another issue the panel addressed is the lack of resources available to trans people fighting problems with housing and employment.<sup>xxxii</sup> In regards to employment rights, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits sex discrimination in employment.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) interprets Title VII's prohibition of sex discrimination as forbidding any employment discrimination based on gender identity. In addition, these protections apply regardless of any contrary state or local laws. Furthermore, the Commission has taken the position that existing sex discrimination provisions in Title VII protect transgender applicants and employees.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In 2015, the EEOC received 271 sex-gender identity/ transgender charges. Of those, 18 were found to have reasonable cause and 12 cases ended with settlements.<sup>xxxv</sup>

One example is the *Schwenk v. Hartford* case, in 2000, when the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals found that discrimination "because one fails to act in the way expected of a man or woman" is forbidden under Title VII.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

In 2014, President Obama signed Executive Order 13672, which prohibits discrimination based on gender identity in the civilian federal workforce and in hiring by federal contractors.<sup>xxxvii</sup> However, this does not include a requirement for employers to conduct mandatory training.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

This law helped Mia Macy, a trans woman who lost a discrimination case under Title VII. In 2011, Macy claimed that a business refused to hire her after learning of her gender transition. On appeal, based on Executive Order 13672, the EEOC stated that "claims of discrimination based on transgender status...are cognizable under Title VII's sex discrimination prohibition."<sup>xxxix</sup>

The Fair Housing Act, enacted as Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act, made it illegal to deny a prospective tenant based on their non-conformity with gender stereotypes.<sup>xl</sup> In 2012, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development issued regulations protecting gender identity to all public and assisted housing and rental assistance programs that receive federal funds and federally insured mortgages.<sup>xli</sup>

In regards to the school system, the U.S. Dept. of Education's Office of Civil Rights decided in 2014 that Title IX should protect trans students from discrimination based on gender identity.<sup>xlii</sup>

Bear Atwood, the attorney who represented Walton during her transition in high school, believes that many trans Americans lack protection because they are not informed about their federal legal rights.

"I think that even with laws, there is a general lack of awareness among the transgender community, the employer community and the housing community that there are federal protections."

When it comes to Mississippi, where there are no anti-discrimination laws, and people are generally uninformed about trans issues, not bringing cases forward is even more prevalent.

"It is difficult for a transgender person to come forward. There continues to be significant discrimination," Atwood said.

In 2010, the Affordable Care Act (ACA) banned sex discrimination in most health care facilities and programs.<sup>xliii</sup> In states where federal assistance has been accepted, provisions include that companies provide a plan without blanket transgender exclusions. This allows for the appeal of denials of medically necessary care, requires insurance records and cards to reflect correct gender, and coverage of medical exams and screenings regardless of gender.<sup>xliv</sup>

According to a White House report, 22 states refused to expand Medicaid under the ACA. The report also found that there are over 177,000 uninsured residents in Mississippi alone.<sup>xlv</sup>

In regards to detention/correctional facilities, under a policy enacted in 2011, trans people detained in federal prisons, jails, halfway houses and prisons that contract with the U.S. Bureau of Prisons have the right to receive an evaluation for gender dysphoria and gender-confirming medical treatment if the evaluation shows they need it.<sup>xlvi</sup>

However, for an individual to pursue a discrimination claim under any of these laws protecting them, they need legal representation. This is a luxury that is not always possible for many trans Americans due to the socioeconomic disadvantages faced.

Since there have been so few studies conducted regarding trans people, data concerning them is usually grouped together with other members of the LGBT community. There are obvious problems with this, for example, the fact that a white, gay male is going to have a much different experience than, say, a trans woman of color. For this reason, I have included the other members of the LGBT community in the following information about socioeconomic status.

The American Psychological Association (APA) measures socioeconomic status as a combination of education, income and occupation.<sup>xlvii</sup> A conceptualization of the social standing or class of an individual or group, where social class, privilege, power and control are emphasized. Also, status is examined as a gradient that reveals inequities in access to and distribution of resources.<sup>xlviii</sup>

The APA found evidence to indicate that LGBT individuals are especially susceptible to being placed at a socioeconomic disadvantage. They concluded, therefore, that the socioeconomic status is "inherently related to the rights and well-being of LGBT persons."<sup>xlix</sup>

While members of this community tend to have more education on average than the general population, research shows that they make less money than their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts. According to the APA, up to 64 percent of transgender people report income below \$25,000.<sup>1</sup>

## WHAT IT MEANS TO BE TRANSGENDER IN MISSISSIPPI

In comparison to a city like New York, which recently made it punishable by law to discriminate against transgender people, the state of Mississippi lags far behind.<sup>li</sup> In fact, there are no policies regarding gender identity.<sup>lii</sup> For this reason, crimes like the murder of Mercedes Williamson go unattributed to hate.

Williamson, a 17-year-old from Alabama, wanted to become a cosmetologist. In May 2015, she was bludgeoned to death with a hammer by her former boyfriend Josh Vallum.<sup>liii</sup> The homicide occurred in George County, Miss. According to an article in the Sun Herald, Vallum told his father that he killed someone and buried them in a field behind his father's home. One day later, George County deputies found Williamson's partially decomposed body buried in a makeshift grave under some brush on the property.<sup>liv</sup>

Under state law, a hate crime is a crime committed against someone based on their "race, color, religion, ethnicity, ancestry, national origin or gender".<sup>lv</sup> However, that does not specifically cover gender identity. This is a key point because crimes committed against transgender people are often committed because the individual is transgender.<sup>lvi</sup> In the case of these particular crimes, if they were not trans, they wouldn't have been attacked; therefore, they need protections based on that exact factor.



In regards to employment, housing and public accommodations, there is no legal prohibition of discrimination based on gender identity for both public and private employees on a statewide level.<sup>lvii</sup>

This is an area where Hayden Graves, a transgender man from Tupelo, Miss., sees the need for a lot of improvement. Graves, a trans advocate who regularly travels and speaks on the topic of trans rights, thinks the major problem comes from the ability to be fired just for being oneself.

"With our state being a right-to-work state, it is easier for companies to discriminate against whomever they choose to discriminate against. If this law were removed, then every company would be required to give a reason for termination," he said.

In a Current Employment Statistics survey conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor, as of February 2016, there were 1,145,200 jobs in Mississippi.<sup>lviii</sup> According to a 2013 department of Labor report, only two to three percent of those jobs are federal employment.<sup>lix</sup>

Since federal anti-discrimination laws do not extend to private or state-run business, without state laws to protect them, any trans person working outside of a federal government is vulnerable to discrimination.

Tammy Rainey, a trans woman from Ripley, Miss., has experienced this discrimination first hand. When she began her transition seven years ago, Rainey went through the process of changing her name and gender marker on all of her legal documentation.

However, since the Mississippi college she attended has a strict policy against changing the name that appears on a degree, any potential employer can have access to her history. She believes the law will only change after the state experiences more trans visibility.

"Until the voters and constituents who vote for those politicians can recognize that discrimination against trans people constitutes discrimination against someone they know and care about, those politicians will feel no pressure to take that discrimination out of their agenda," she said.

Beyond the obvious devastating effects of unimpeded employment discrimination, the other major factor in play is health care. The reality is that most of the state is void of providers even willing to treat trans people in relation to transition.

"This means that a trans person not only has to find some way to pay out of pocket for any care they receive, but has to travel perhaps hundreds of miles to find a willing provider," Rainey said.

There is no law providing transgender inclusive insurance protection for private health care.<sup>lx</sup> In addition, state Medicaid has no explicit policy regarding transgender health coverage and care.<sup>lxi</sup> Because trans people often require surgery and HRT to alter their appearances in order to feel comfortable in their bodies, this lack of health care is deeply impactful.

When Morgan Philley, a senior at the University of Mississippi, began his transition in 2014, he quickly discovered just how difficult it is to find resources.

"Not only do you have to go through so many hoops to get your surgery and to get your hormones, and your legal paperwork changes, but I was terrified because I couldn't find a good source on where to begin that process," he said.

One of those sources is Melissa Knight, a clinical social worker in Tupelo, Miss. Since doctors require a letter from a therapist before prescribing hormone replacement therapy (HRT), or recommending surgery, counseling is often the first step in a trans person's journey.

"Physicians want to make sure that transgender patients understand what they are getting into, that they don't have mental health challenges and that it's not an impulsive decision," she said.

The cost of transitioning, depending on the level required by the individual, can become prohibitively expensive.<sup>lxii</sup> Combined with no health care coverage, the out-of-pocket cost can often be too much of a financial burden. Being forced to live in a body one does not identify with, and unable to get the help needed, can lead to mental anguish. Indeed, depression is a serious issue in the trans community.<sup>lxiii</sup>

"If you don't like the person you see in the mirror every day, and you have to look at yourself every day, that makes you sad. If you are sad long enough, you get depressed," Knight said.

In the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, created by The National Center for Transgender Equality and the National LGBTQ Task Force, over 6,400 transgender and gender non-conforming people were interviewed.<sup>lxiv</sup> The results were staggering. Over 40 percent of respondents reported attempting suicide. The general population reports a 1.6 percent suicide attempt rate.<sup>lxv</sup>

According to Article 25 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, access to health care is a basic human right.<sup>lxvi</sup> The fact that it is being withheld from people in need is a gross mistreatment of justice.

Mississippi does not appear to be making any changes for the better either. Rather, the state seems to be moving backward. During the 2016 legislature regular session House Bill number 1523 was introduced by House Speaker Philip Gunn.<sup>lxvii</sup> In February, it passed the House with an 80-39 vote, and in March, it passed the Senate with a 32-17 count.<sup>lxviii</sup> <sup>lxix</sup> On April 5, Gov. Phil Bryant, signed the bill into law.<sup>lxx</sup>

Known as the Religious Liberty Accommodations Act, the legislation states that it is acceptable to discriminate based on a sincerely held belief that "Male (man) or female (woman) refer to an individual's immutable biological sex as objectively determined by anatomy and genetics at the time of birth."<sup>lxxi</sup>

Furthermore, the government "shall not take any discriminatory actions against a person wholly or partially on the basis that the person declines to participate in the provision of treatments, counseling, or surgeries related to sex reassignment or gender identity transitioning." It goes on to include protections for sex-specific standards or policies concerning employee or student dress or grooming, access to restrooms, locker rooms, etc.<sup>lxxii</sup>

State Representative Jay Hughes sees the bill as blatant discrimination. "It is a complete rejection of the law of the land, and reinforces the negative image so many others have about our state," he said. "There is very little different between this wording and the state's rejection of Brown vs. Board of Education requiring our schools to desegregate."

Hughes believes the reasoning behind the bill stems from a lack of accurate information and education, another area where the state struggles to excel."If passed by the Senate, and signed by the governor, it will be challenged in court for its blatant illegality, and waste hundreds of thousands of precious tax dollars that could and should be going to the education of our children."

Mississippi is not the only state attempting to/ passing these types of laws. In March, South Dakota Gov. Dennis Daugaard vetoed a bill that would have required trans students in the state's public schools to use bathrooms and locker rooms that matched their sex at birth. In an article from CNN, the governor said the bill does not address any pressing issues concerning the school districts.<sup>lxxiii</sup>

"Local school districts can, and have, made necessary restroom and locker room accommodations that serve the best interests of all students, regardless of biological sex or gender identity," Daugaard said.

Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal announced that he too will veto a bill that would allow faith-based organizations the option to deny services and jobs to member of the LGBT community. In a CNN report, Deal said he does not think the state needs to discriminate against anyone to protect the faith-based community, of which he has been a part of all his life.<sup>lxxiv</sup>

In March, North Carolina Gov. Pat McCrory chose to sign a similar 'religious liberty' bill into law. This legislation blocks local governments from passing anti-discrimination rules to protect trans people. According to an article from National Public Radio, the law also requires all government-controlled facilities to assign multiple-occupancy bathrooms and locker rooms to a

single sex. It goes further to prevent anyone who does not match that biological sex from using the facility.<sup>lxxv</sup>

In addition to pass the recent anti-transgender law, Mississippi also has no non-discrimination or anti-bullying laws and policies covering gender identity.<sup>lxxvi</sup> Education is the best way to make change a reality in society. Mississippi needs to create laws that protect trans students. Furthermore, the state needs to implement a system that will inform cisgender students about trans issues so that ignorance does not become a factor that develops into fear, discrimination and violence.

One such system was enacted in 2015 when the county school board of Fairfax, VA., approved expanding their sex education curriculum to include gender identity and transgender issues. According to a Washington Post article, the lesson is given to grades seven through 10, but includes a parental opt-out for children.<sup>lxxvii</sup>

Without these kinds of protections and safeguards, Mississippi sends the message that they do not care about a portion of the population. A group of people who pay taxes, have basic human needs and deserve basic human rights.

## VIOLENCE AGAINST THE TRANS COMMUNITY

The Anti-Violence Project, an organization that seeks to empower the LGBT community through counseling and advocacy, reported that transgender people are 3.7 times more likely to experience violence compared to cisgender survivors and victims.<sup>lxxviii</sup> Also, trans people are seven times more likely to experience physical violence when interacting with the police compared to cisgender survivors and victims.<sup>lxxix</sup>

In 2015, a record number of transgender homicides were reported. Over 21 people were killed, with a majority of crimes perpetrated against trans women of color.<sup>lxxx</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

The purpose of addressing this topic through video is to reveal the complex emotional experiences each person has experienced through visual storytelling. Although such issues may be translated via the written word, visual storytelling allows for the revealing of key emotional revelations during an interview.

The main difference is in the moments where the audience can see and hear the person sharing a specifically important piece of personal information. For example, what it feels like to be trapped in the wrong body, the experience of being kicked out of their home, or the feeling of being rejected by a potential love interest. All of these are struggles that trans people may face by revealing their identity. This does not pertain to only negative issues, because there can also be visual relief or delight in an interviewee's face while speaking about using HRT, or post-operation, or finding love.



## CONCLUSIONS

I first began interviewing transgender people at the University of Mississippi as an undergraduate. However, it was not until my first year of graduate school, in 2014, that I thoroughly explored the topic. Since then, I have been gathering information through online research and interviews.

Further research included studying other documentaries about this issue, and learning what appeared to work, and what did not. Combined with this information, as well as my personal creative preferences, this approach has helped me focus on how to present information.

Although many documentaries include a narrator, to help provide information not covered in interviews, I felt that *Trans Mississippi* did not need it for two reasons. Since this is a character driven story, the video is not packed with information that may have otherwise required a voice over. Also, by asking specific questions during interviews, I was able to gather the footage I needed in order for the stories to be clear and concise.

Some documentarians choose to use pictures or old home videos of trans people before they transitioned. In some situations, this may be helpful for the viewer to understand the significance of the person's decision to alter their appearance. For example, in the film *Transparent* (2005), a collection of stories about trans people who had children before they transitioned, the audience may be able to relate to how they would feel if their own parent changed gender roles.<sup>81</sup>

For the purpose of *Trans Mississippi*, I chose to exclude this type of material. Rather than focusing on the gender and body they do not identify with, I used footage to show who they are now. This was particularly important in the case of Walton, who has fully transitioned. She has made great efforts to eradicate all traces of Dylan, her birth name, and dredging up those thoughts and feelings was not going to benefit the video.

In my opinion, showing old photographs removes the focus from the present and the future. Since those were the two things I addressed, it was counterproductive to include pre-transition pictures of Walton. It was pointless to include them for Jenkins, who has not yet begun to transition.

The goal with Walton was to tell one woman's story about what it is like to be transgender in Mississippi, not to focus on things like how much her appearance has changed or how well she 'passes' (ability to be regarded as cisgender).

Another issue that I addressed in the documentary is that of gender confirmation surgery. In Walton's case, surgery is an integral part of her story. It was the first shoot I did with her, and it was a massively important event in her life. Other than me, she went alone, and I ended up having to sign a release after she came out of anesthesia. Although I was unaware at the time that my assistance would be needed, this situation forged a relationship that gave me nearly unlimited access to her as source in the future.

In the case of Jenkins, since any potential gender confirmation surgeries are a long way off, I chose to spotlight the goals he finds obtainable in the near future. For example, he received notification that he has been accepted to the University of Mississippi, and has made plans to begin his transition by using male pronouns upon arrival.

Some documentaries group the LGBT community together in order to tell a specific story. Such is the case in the film *Paris is Burning* (1990), which involves the African-American, Latino, transgender and gay communities in New York City. The director, Jennie Livingston revealed the intricate details of ball culture, including, competition, categories, dress, make-up and more. The focus of *Paris* was to chronicle this LGBT subculture during the 1980s, so it was important to include all of the participants.<sup>82</sup>

Since the purpose of *Trans Mississippi* was to focus on gender identity, I excluded all references to sexual orientation. It only comes up once, when Jenkins goes through his break up and wonders if it is because of his fiancé's sexual orientation.

There are a handful of documentaries regarding trans issues specifically, such as *Southern Comfort* (2001), a story about a transgender man from Georgia who is dying from ovarian cancer. Directed by Kate Davis, this film deals with the health care system, as they were unable to find a doctor to treat a transgender man, and family, as his parents still saw him as their daughter.<sup>83</sup>

However, due to the complexity of this subject matter, there is still plenty of work to be done. Other filmmakers could approach the topic from many different angles to further educate the public about what it means to be trans.

If I had more time and resources, some of the experiences I would have explored include: trans people who are older, people who have a trans parent, professionals, victims of crime/ and/or discrimination. Through these individual stories, the public can gain a better understanding of the trials faced by trans people.

The reason behind this project was educational. The hope is, by better understanding the trans community, cisgender people will see the need for change and work toward making equality a reality. Like the many journalists who have come before me, I wanted to shine a light on an issue in our society that needs correcting.

In a nation with a long history of civil rights violations, the trans community suffers greatly. In a state where religious beliefs are often placed above the concern for equality, trans Mississippians are not deemed worthy of protection. Faced with an exceptional amount of challenges, they have no choice but to try and make a better life for themselves.

In review of my project, I feel I was able to accomplish my goal of using the stories of two trans Mississippians to show that their community is vastly underrepresented and overlooked. These people are our neighbors and co-workers. They deserve equal protection under the law.

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### FEATURED WORKS

*From Garden of Eden to Ghost Town*, Photo Essay, [Medium](#)

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