

QUEER SUBCULTURE IN THE CONSERVATIVE SOUTH: A STUDY OF DRAG
PERFORMERS IN MISSISSIPPI

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

by

CHRISTINA ALISON HUFF

May 2021

Copyright Christina Alison Huff 2021
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT

The amount of research on Mississippi LGBTQ communities is scarce. It is well established that ethnographic research on rural Southern queer communities is lacking, and that most LGBTQ research is conducted in metropolitan areas in the northern and western areas of the United States. This study investigates the lives of Mississippi drag performers through films, photographs, and audio documentaries. Specifically, these primary sources demonstrate that many LGBTQ members are thriving in historically conservative rural Southern areas by carving out spaces for their own existence.

To understand the lives of drag performers in the South, five different interviews were conducted over the span of two years. These interviews were conducted through snowball sampling, and participants were asked to respond to several questions ranging from their childhood to what initially drew them to drag. Alongside these interviews, their live performances were documented as well. While the project was served to simply document the lives of Mississippi drag queens, there were three major themes spanned across all interviews. The subjects all agreed that the South was a difficult place to grow up LGBTQ, that the rural Southern drag scene differed compared to metropolitan areas, and that gender expression via drag was subjective. The results of this project suggest that Southern LGBTQ subcultures are understudied and historians and scholars studying the American South may benefit from more primary resources.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deep and sincere gratitude to my thesis chair Dr. Andy Harper for his mentorship, guidance, and friendship throughout this thesis. His time, dedication, and support for this project has been invaluable. I would also like to thank Dr. Kirsten Dellinger and Dr. Theresa Starkey for their education and advice during this thesis.

To Eric White and Justin Holbrook, I simply could not have created this project without your love, support, and trust to let me into your lives. Your patience and understanding expanded my horizons in ways I never thought were possible. I also want to thank Taylor Green, Jada Lee Symone, and Jack McCrory for their invaluable voices and their time.

Lastly, I want to thank my family, friends, and my husband for their endless encouragement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
HISTORY OF DRAG.....	5
GENDER AND DRAG PERFORMANCE.....	9
AVOIDING EXPLOITATION IN DOCUMENTARY WORK.....	17
PROCESS AND METHODS.....	21
SOUTHERN LGBTQ NARRATORS.....	47
CONCLUSION.....	57
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	61
VITA.....	64

INTRODUCTION

One of the very first drag shows I attended was in October of 2019, in Tupelo, Mississippi, and I had gone with the intent of examining an LGBTQ subculture through the lens of my camera. I was particularly interested in this show because Tupelo is in Lee County, which has voted red since 1980.¹ I became fascinated with finding pockets of queer subculture in areas of Mississippi that were predominantly conservative, as I was curious to see how these small communities and rural spaces were shaping queer culture and queer identity--or better yet, how queer life was shaping rural and small communities. One of the reasons I wanted to examine drag culture in the South more closely is because LGBTQ communities in the South are understudied. According to Amy L. Stone's article, *The Geography of Research on LGBTQ Life: Why Sociologists Should Study the South, Rural Queers, and Ordinary Cities*, in sociology, one in ten studies look closely at LGBTQ life and culture in this region, and there are biases in sociological research when it comes to geographics. For example, 26% of sociological research that focuses on LGBTQ life is in the Northeast, 30% is on the West Coast, and only 15% of LGBTQ studies examine the South. In particular, California, New York, Texas, and Florida acquire the most attention in regards to the study of queer culture, even though 35% of LGBTQ people reside in the South, underrepresenting southern queer stories in the United States.² The article emphasizes that LGBTQ life and culture are generalized based on urban settings in the

¹Leip, David. Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, n.d. [Dave Leip's Atlas of US Presidential Elections](https://www.daveleip.com/index.html)index.html.

² Stone, "The Geography of Research on LGBT Q Life: Why Sociologists Should Study the South, Rural Queers, and Ordinary Cities," 4, 5

North and the West, which only gives us the context of LGBTQ lifestyles that reside in those areas. When the South is underrepresented, scholars who are studying LGBTQ culture in America are not given the full context of what queer life is like in the United States. It seems negligent to study LGBTQ life while omitting 35% of that population, and specifically, the population that resides in the South. Even though I was not aware of these statistics, it was the art, the performances, the culture, and the community that I was drawn to, which is how I started my plunge into the lives of Southern drag performers.

My work began during the fall of 2019 at the University of Mississippi where I took classes with Dr. Jessie Wilkerson, John Rash, and Dr. Adam Gussow. In Dr. Wilkerson's class, Oral History of Southern Social Movement, we learned about the different methods and approaches to interviewing people and their respective communities. By mid-semester, the class divided in half to pick a project that they wanted to work on; the options being a Water Valley, Mississippi oral history project, or a Southern queer histories project, and I chose the latter because it directly aligned with my interests. Each project required the students to go into these communities and engage, and in early October of 2019, Dr. Wilkerson asked the students who decided to work on the queer histories project to attend a drag show in Tupelo, Mississippi, about a forty-five minute drive outside of Oxford, Mississippi. Additionally, I was also taking a class with John Rash where we were introduced to different documentary and storytelling methods. One of the projects for Mr. Rash was to observe a community with our camera. I decided that taking a camera to the drag show would be the perfect opportunity to immerse myself in the community while also getting another project done for class. Little did I know that this was the beginning of my thesis work.

When I began my thesis project, like any other project that is fresh and new and exciting, I was thinking big. I initially decided that I would focus on the LGBTQ South, but like any other scholar, narrowing down my topic was crucial. Because I attended the Tupelo drag show in early October and already had several hours worth of footage under my belt, the idea of creating a project for my thesis work that revolved around drag performance in the South was a thought that began to ruminate in my head. As time progressed, it was clear that trying to capture the majority of drag life in the South as a whole, which accounted for about 30% of the United States, would be an impossible feat--and would certainly make my work feel incomplete. I realized my interest in observing LGBTQ life in smaller and rural spaces in the South, rather than larger metropolitan areas such as Atlanta, Nashville, or Memphis. It wasn't until early 2020, the second semester of my graduate school education, that I wanted to focus on drag performance culture in Mississippi, but I wasn't sure how I was going to do that yet, so I made a list of questions of ideas that I wanted to explore. One of my questions going into this work was, how did Mississippi shape queer community? Or rather, more importantly, how did these LGBTQ communities carve out spaces within the Bible Belt South to create their own safe space in a space that is known for its religious conservatism and homophobia? Throughout my work and my research, I asked questions that better helped me understand what Southern drag performers thought about their craft and why people turn to drag. I asked questions about their ideas on gender and gender expression, I asked questions about their communities and where they grew up, and I asked questions about the Southern drag experience as a whole. While I was researching these questions, I also took classes on gender and the history of sexuality in the United States to help me develop a clearer idea of what I wanted to focus on for my project.

My original plan for this thesis work was to create a thirty to forty-five-minute film by interviewing as many drag queens as possible, as well as attending as many shows as I could in Mississippi. However, the COVID-19 pandemic put everything on hold during my first year of graduate school, and I decided that creating an archive for an art form that has gone neglected in the South would be a better way to present my work, given the obstacles. While I wanted to draw a clear picture of what drag in Mississippi looks like on a larger scale, because of the circumstances, I decided it would make the most sense to focus on five people who are from and live in Mississippi, the majority of the interviews I had already obtained before COVID-19. For my thesis project, I've created a multimodal project of films, audio documentaries, and photographs where I bring the voices of five performers to life. These are primary sources that otherwise would never have been documented, and more importantly, become more invaluable pieces to the puzzle for historians who are studying the South.

CHAPTER 1 - THE HISTORY OF DRAG

The historical side of drag is complicated, and for the sake of this thesis, I will not go into great detail about its history. However, I do think that it is important to understand some of the history, and I think the most appropriate place to start is with the first American drag queen to have ever been recorded. William Dorsey Swann, a Black man born into slavery in 1860 on the soil of Maryland, became the first queer activist and the first drag queen, or "queen of dag." During the 1880s, Swann held frequent drag balls in Washington, DC, where men would dress as women with makeup, jewelry, and other feminine garments, even though at the time it was illegal and one could go to jail for cross-dressing. As an activist, Swann legally defended his right for himself and other LGBTQ members to gather without police intervention after going to jail for ten months in 1886 for running a brothel and a drag ball. Even though there were many raids and arrests, Swann's drag balls continued behind the scenes. Swann's history as the first queer drag queen is significant because almost a century before Stonewall, Black queer activists were fighting for their rights immediately after the American Civil War and dictated the tone that would help queer activism in the United States for years to come.³

In the South during the mid-nineteenth century, minstrel shows were a popular way for female impersonation to make it to the stage. In these minstrel shows, white men would mock different singing and dancing styles that were prominent in Black culture. Female characters developed out of minstrelsy as racist performances became popular, and white men would wear blackface and enact hyper-stereotypical female acts to all-white audiences. The first two minstrel

³ Joseph, "The First Drag Queen Was a Former Slave," <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/drag-queen-slave-ball/>.

female impersonators in the United States began with Thomas Dartmouth Rice and George Washington Dixon, two white actors who mimicked African song and dance in the late 1820s.⁴ In Arkansas, female impersonation beauty pageants were favored and even admired types of entertainment. In Brock Thompson's book *The Un-Natural State*, there is a photograph circa 1930 that shows two white men in blackface escorting a white man (who is not in blackface) dressed as a woman onto a stage. This example of blackface minstrelsy and female impersonation during this time in Arkansas reinforced the Southern white superiority mindset that permeated the South,⁵ but it also confronted a lot of the anxieties that people had about race, class, and gender.⁶

Comparatively, while the South used female impersonation as a way to contain and accentuate rigid gender, race, and class expectations, the Northern United States used drag to critique, explore, and celebrate those differences. For example, in the 1920s, places like Harlem were home to many LGBTQ artists such as Alain Locke and Langston Hughes who contributed to building Harlem as the “homosexual mecca” during the Harlem Renaissance. Many artists such as Hughes and Locke were open about their LGBTQ status and heavily criticized the oppressive natures in heterosexual culture in their work. Alongside Harlem artists were other LGBTQ Black working-class Harlem residents who were also outspoken about their homosexuality, which made Harlem “the most liberated public space in U.S. history.” One popular event in Harlem during the Renaissance was drag balls, or parties where men and women would dress up in extravagant, feminized outfits and dance and sing to music by blues musicians such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Mabel Hampton. Music by Rainey, Smith, and Hampton often encompassed narratives about lesbian or bisexual women, as well as

⁴ Bean, and Esteban, “Female Impersonation in Nineteenth-Century American Blackface Minstrelsy,” 2

⁵ Thompson, *The Un-Natural State*, 26

⁶ Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*, 29

“mannish-women” and “bulldaggers,” further accentuating Harlem as a space for LGBTQ liberation.⁷

Even though drag and entertainment tended to vary in different portions of the United States, as a whole, the industrialization of consumerism changed entertainment by the early 1900s. The entertainment industry became a place where people could explore social freedom and cross social boundaries. For example, the most popular forms of entertainment in vaudeville were female impersonators, but many social moralists contested this because they believed the entertainment sphere such as theater and vaudeville bred an environment of crime, gambling, and sexual deviancy. As the entertainment industry began to grow, so did the exploration in challenging traditional beliefs about gender and sexuality. As cinema became a more popular form of entertainment, the film industry enlisted vaudeville actors and actresses to appear in their films.⁸ Reserved only for straight white-male actors, female impersonation and cross-dressing on stage were not originally linked to homosexuality up until about the 1960s.⁹ In contrast, early cinema with vaudeville actors and actresses began to explore queer representation. For example, the 1891 book *A Florida Enchantment*, which later turned into a film in 1914, is a fictional story about two white women who turn into men after taking "magical sex-change seeds" from Africa. As a comedy that encompasses disarray and confusion over women turning into men, this film became the launching point for early lesbian and gay cinema studies. Some other films from this period that addressed concerns over the changes in the gender-binary status quo were *Lillian's Dilemma* (1914), *Molly the Drummer Boy* (1914), and *The Woman* (1915).¹⁰

⁷ Thaddeus, "The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality," 103, 105.

⁸ Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, 105

⁹ Bolze, "Female impersonation in the United States, 1900--1970," 1

¹⁰ Siobhan *Queering the Color Line Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, 41, 46

As a student documenting the South, my project is not to research the history of drag in a substantive or significant way. However, understanding the history of drag is inevitable when comprehending that drag was a means to lock in or critique our ideas of gender, race, and class throughout different portions of the United States. In the South, because female impersonation was a way for people to alleviate their anxieties about race and gender, there are reasonable grounds to take a deeper look at drag and gender performance in the southern spaces contemporarily, as it may shed light on how people in the South explore, express, and come to conclusions about their LGBTQ status and gender identities.

CHAPTER 2 - GENDER AND DRAG PERFORMANCE

During my second year of graduate school, I took classes with Dr. Eva Payne, Dr. Theresa Starkey, and Dr. Kirsten Dellinger. All of these classes revolved around gender, gender identity, and the history of sexuality, and I used the research and knowledge that I learned to better understand drag and gender expression. I also tried to find a way to connect it to our ideas of the South--a space known for its religious fundamentalism and conservatism--and how LGBTQ members in the drag community were navigating this space. While I wasn't so much focused on gender and gender identity in the beginning of this project, it was an aspect that I kept running into within my work, as drag performance is quintessential gender-bending.

Drag is a fascinating place to explore LGBTQ identity and gender expression because drag takes aspects from masculinity and femininity, as well as aspects from both heterosexual culture and homosexual culture--mashing them to brand a new image of gender and sexuality on their own terms. Drag performers turn gender and sexuality into art by using their bodies as a canvas to challenge and deconstruct heteronormative culture. According to sociologist Esther Newton, all drag performers fit into the subculture of homosexuality and are all symbols of LGBTQ culture. Newton describes how in drag performance, there are many ways in which we can think of masculine and feminine gender presentation. In one of those ways, she writes, "all drag symbolism opposes the 'inner' or the 'real' self (subjective self) to the 'outer' self (social self)."¹¹ Newton explains how drag queens either wear masculine clothing over feminine clothing or wear feminine clothing over masculine clothing. This idea symbolizes our inner and outer

¹¹ Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, 100, 101

selves by hiding our "inner" identities and presenting our "social" identities, broadening our understanding of gender being a social performance with a costume. Furthermore, Newton presents the idea of combining gendered items, such as lipstick and high heels with masculine clothing. She states that because the feminine items stand out so much compared to the masculine items, the inner identification of the performer (or whomever the body it may be who is wearing it), is feminine. The idea here is that when drag queens are performing, there is the "appearance" that is inherently female while the "reality" or "essence" is male.

This is an idea that I have begun to challenge in my own research and my own oral histories with the drag performers I've been working with myself. On one hand, while most people understand drag to be the caricature of a specific gender representation opposite of the gender identity of the performer, there are also queens in the industry who identify as femme queens. Femme queens are women or transgender women who perform femme drag, accentuating the "realness" of their own gender identity. The idea that drag is solely the idea that the "appearance" is the opposite of the core gender identity of the performer seems to be shifting as more performers are defining their own drag and what it inherently represents on a personal level.

Additionally, in her article "Performative Acts and Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Judith Butler argues that gender is a socially constructed concept that is both produced and sustained, in addition to being a performance.¹² The lens of antiquity highlights performance as well as ancient ideas of identity and the body as it relates to performance and theater. Anne Duncan, author of "Performance of Identity in the Classical World," writes how many sources coming out of the ancient world illustrate "personal identity as the possession of a stable, coherent, integrated self where appearance matches essence." While

¹² Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," 528, 522

not directly speaking about gender and biological sex, one could analyze that people in the ancient world had an understanding of these ideas of a fictional self through theater and performance. Duncan illustrates the possibilities of looking at identity through acting, theatrics, and the body--the body being the place where cultural and historical aspects such as language and symbolism defines identity. In the ancient world, some people believed that identity was a set attribute, while others believed it was fluid and ever-changing. One such account Duncan gives as an example of this concept is that of, in her words, the “pantomime” and the “barbarian.” In this account, a pantomime was getting ready to perform, and a barbarian had said, "my friend, I didn't realize that although you have one body, you have many souls." When the pantomime had laid down five different masks that embodied five different characters - the barbarian presumed that identity is a fixed trait per person.

Because the body is a physical vessel for feelings, emotions, and ideas, it is also the same vessel in which they can confront and challenge themselves through acting and performance, often involving an audience. No matter the act or the performance, there will always be some sort of relationship between the actor and the viewer. There will always be a mutual understanding between the actor and the spectator that what the actor embodies on the outside is not what they embody on the inside. Simply put, there is something underneath the costume, the frill, the makeup, and the jewelry.¹³ To expand on this idea, Walter Kerr, a drama critic, describes the connection between the audience and the performer as "a circuit that is fluid, unpredictable, ever-changing in its impulses, crackling, intimate."¹⁴ There is this idea that drag emphasizes the fluidity around gender and our ideas of gender-bending, but it only works when the audience is in on the secret as well. Conversely, those who aren't in on the secret of understanding the blurred lines of gender, gender performance, sexuality, and drag, may condemn impersonation

¹³ Duncan, *Performance and Identity in the Classical World*, 6, 7, 9, 10

¹⁴ Levitt et al, “Drag Gender: Experiences of Gender for Gay and Queer Men Who Perform Drag,” 379

(and in this case, theatrical impersonation) as lying about an identity, and thus question the morality and ethics behind self-constructed identity. Is drag performance just theater? Or is it in the realm of gender-bending as a political statement? Or is it none of these things, or all of them at the same time?

What is so fascinating about this work is that the researcher can never fully answer any one of these questions; drag is truly a subjective experience. It is not only an identity, but an art that varies from region to region, person to person. Every drag performer has come to a different conclusion about what drag means to them, and with the five drag performers I interviewed for this project, there are both connections and differences in how they think, approach, and embody their personas as drag performers. All five of my subjects had different ideas about what drag meant for them in terms of their LGBTQ identity and gender expression, but they all agreed that drag was a way for them to circumvent the harsher attitudes that the South historically presents when it comes to minority lifestyles.

Drag caters to a culture that makes LGBTQ spaces safe, especially for people who want to experiment with gender-bending. One of the possible reasons why queer or gender-nonconforming people turn to drag in the South is because the South is historically a religious and conservative space where these ideas and thoughts are not necessarily as welcomed compared to other places in the United States. According to sociologists Carter and Bosch, they believe that the South is more likely to be intolerant to other lifestyles due to religious fundamentalism and living in sparsely populated areas where Southerners do not have regular interactions with people of different backgrounds. Consequently, Southerners were more likely to have biases toward “nontraditional” gender roles, or any type of gender role that deviates from the norm.¹⁵ For example, Southerners who do not fit in the stereotypical cisgender standards of masculinity and femininity are commonly ostracized from not only their own families and

¹⁵ Scott and Borch, “Assessing the Effects of Urbanism and Regionalism on Gender Role Attitudes, 1974-1998,” 560.

friends but their communities as well. This fear of ostracization from the community may inform where and how LGBTQ people turn to experiment with their sexuality and gender identity.

To elaborate on the exploration of Southern queer identity and drag in the South, Ashley A. Baker and Kimberly Kelly conducted 27 interviews in their article "Live like a king, y'all: Gender negotiation and the performance of masculinity among Southern drag kings," to examine and discover if there were regional differences in drag performance within a Southern context compared to the rest of the United States. From their findings, it seems as though drag queens (or men who impersonate women via performance) often explore and question their own identity from a young age before becoming involved in drag, while drag kings (or women who impersonate men via performance) find that they start to reconsider their own gender identity after performing. For example, Southern drag kings turn to drag, not as a political or feminist statement (which is common in Northern areas of the United States), rather drag helps women who perform as kings develop a better understanding of their own gender identity. Southern drag kings use drag to help escape gender-rigid environments in which they grew up and live. Baker and Kelly found that Southern drag kings started performing drag after many years of identifying with masculinity, even though they considered themselves cis-gender only to fit in. Many interviewees expressed that it was too taboo to perform masculinity in their communities and that by doing drag, "it was a way to be exactly who I wanted to be without the fear of judgment...when I am on stage, I feel completely comfortable because I am being viewed as the guy that I know I am."¹⁶ Many Southern kings rejected their masculinity growing up, and drag was a way for them to have an outlet to express themselves by performing as men. Lastly, Baker and Kelly found that many of the respondents said that their families did not support their

¹⁶ Baker and Kelly, "Live like a king, y'all: Gender negotiation and the performance of masculinity among Southern drag kings," 53

trans-identities. Trans people who found a queer family, or “the families we choose”, outside of their biological family added a lot of value to their life.¹⁷

We can see another example of Southern LGBTQ folks turning to drag as a way to explore their gender identity through Patrick E. Johnson’s book, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*. In his chapter “Trannies, Transvestites, and Drag Queens, Oh My! Transitioning the South”, the reader is allowed to see in-depth personal narratives of how some Black gay men, especially gender non-conforming men, live their lives in the South through different oral histories. One of the participants named Chasity, a male to female trans woman, speaks about that growing up she felt very feminine, and while in beauty school she was introduced to gay clubs and drag performance through a few of her friends. Wanting to try out drag herself, she entered herself into talent shows that involved drag, but realized that she needed more to her life than just “dressing in drag.” She expressed that drag helped her figure out her true gender identity and helped her decide to live her everyday life as a woman.¹⁸

“Live like a king, y’all” and *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* are just two examples of why gender nonconforming people turn to drag in the South. Performing gender outside of the gender binary, especially in places like the South, can come with some consequences, which is why Southern performers use drag as an outlet to perform those identities. There is an idea that performing gender ‘accurately’ is “a strategy of survival”¹⁹ and that society penalizes people for not “doing gender” in a way that matches the body. Sociologists West and Zimmerman explore this on a deeper level by looking at Goffman’s ideas of gender displays as gendered behaviors through “perfunctory, conventionalized acts” which set up how we conduct ourselves in social situations according to our understanding of gender. Connected to gender display comes the idea of gender accountability, or how society deems how an individual

¹⁷ Baker and Kelly, 58, 57

¹⁸ Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*, 351

¹⁹ Butler, 522

should “do gender.”²⁰ Gender accountability is part of society’s way of policing or micromanaging how a person should perform gender according to their biological sex, thus leading to a heightened desire to perform gender accurately to avoid ostracization.²¹

In Heidi M. Levitt, et al. article, “Drag Gender: Experiences of Gender for Gay and Queer Men who Perform Drag,” she explores how, based on personal gender identity and social contexts, gay, bisexual, and queer men perform drag. She conducted a study with men who performed drag to see how they feel and understand gender, if at all. The participants were eighteen cis-gendered gay men who embodied a male gender identity outside of performing drag. Throughout several questions that she presented to her sample, in terms of drag as expressing gender and exploring gender complexity, she found that the majority of her respondents had mixed results in how they viewed gender and gender identity through drag. Of the eighteen drag queens that Levitt interviewed, ten respondents thought that their performances in drag was a space to challenge and question politics and prejudices toward heterosexism and transphobia. Many of the queens’ responses to Levitt’s study were also contingent on their ideas of gender and gender expression, where they thought gender expression was either binary (static) or fluid (changing). Thirteen out of the eighteen drag performers participating saw no change in their internal understanding of gender; they experienced drag as a “binary switch” between male and female identity only on external terms. Seven of the eighteen respondents said that their internal understandings of their own gender identity altered when they switched into their drag persona. Lastly, eight out of the eighteen participants noted that gender was fluid and that drag created a space in which they were able to explore and enact that fluidity.²²

²⁰ West and Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” 129, 136

²¹ Connell, “Doing, Undoing, or Redoing Gender?,” 39, 40

²² Levitt et al. 369, 381, 377, 378

These two articles by Baker, Kelly, and Levitt are examples of how drag performers connect themselves to their ideas of gender and gender identity. This further accentuates our ideas that drag is not necessarily a monolithic experience for everyone, but that many people do use drag as an outlet to escape gender norms and gender expectations in their communities. Because the South tends to be more conservative and rural in nature, I thought that studying and observing LGBTQ nightlife in North Mississippi would be fascinating; as discussed in my introduction, sociologists tend to understudy queer in the South. Because there is a regional bias to studying queer life, queer life in the South challenges metronormativity as the ideal “basis” of queer life in places like the North and the West. Cities such as New York and San Francisco have positioned themselves as spaces for the LGBTQ community, and there is this idea that queer people have to move to a “place of tolerance” in order to thrive. These “places of tolerance” often exclude the more rural spaces within the South.²³ Even though the South has pockets of conservatism, it also has pockets of progressivism and thriving queer life. I think for many people when they think about the LGBTQ lifestyle, they picture places such as Miami, New York City, and San Francisco, and they are less likely to think about Starkville, Tupelo, or Oxford, Mississippi. This thesis is meant to bring more awareness of LGBTQ life in the rural South, while also taking a deeper look at what drag in the South means to these performers.

²³ Stone, 2, 3

CHAPTER 3 - AVOIDING EXPLOITATION IN DOCUMENTARY WORK

Trust building and relationship building within a community is a crucial first step while planning a documentary project. That being said, documentary work can be tricky. It is more than just a film, a recording, or a written piece that provides an account of an event or a person's life, and it is incumbent upon the documentarian to go beyond the exclusive role of telling a story. A documentary is a collaborative record of someone's story, and it is the filmmaker's role to observe, stay ethical, give up control, and stay open to new ideas and experiences.

Documentary filmmaking, just like any other art form, cannot simply be an objective piece. It is the storyteller's job to put a new perspective and understanding of the world in front of an audience that gracefully tells a story without losing sight of the exploitative nature that comes with the privilege of owning a camera and sound equipment. There is a fine line between collaborative and predatory documentary work, and filmmakers need to reflect on their issues of power (and their place in power) before they enter a space that is not theirs. Documentary work is an incredibly invasive process that demands a heightened level of awareness from the documentarian concerning the power dynamic between the subject and the documentarian, and it's crucial to understand what it's like to be on both sides of the camera. I studied this concept throughout the first year of my master's program, through Walker Evans' and James Agee's text, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In this text, Evans and Agee paint an image of the Depression Era tenant farmer in Alabama during the 1920s, written as a detailed portrait of impoverished living. In their prose and photographs, Agee and Evans document farmers and their relationships to the land, their homes, their possessions, and their families, but Agee frequently confesses

turmoil and unrest with feeling like he is an outsider documenting these struggling families, “spying” on them for his own personal gain and artistic revenue. He realizes that the power dynamic is unbalanced and that he is opening up a world to the public that may have never surfaced without his presence. Agee writes, “...the camera seems to me, unassisted and weaponless consciousness, the central instrument of our time, and is why in turn I feel such rage at its misuse: which has spread so nearly universal a corruption of sight that I know of less than a dozen alive whose eyes I can trust even so much as me own.”²⁴ Agee is aware of his audience’s appetite to consume images that create shock value and understood the position and power that they had over the people they were documenting for the Farm Security Administration.

In photography, a viewer can witness every stage of human existence, including suffering, misfortune, and poverty. By exposing ourselves to conditions that are worse than ours, are we morally obliged to do something about the situation once we bear witness to the issue? Another way I studied exploitative documentary work was through Susan Sontag’s book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. She writes that photographs turn spaces, people, and events into tangible items, and when we are looking at this documentation, we feel we are not an accessory to the cruel conditions of humanity. Sontag writes:

So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent--if not inappropriate--response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and my in ways we might prefer not to imagine--be linked to their suffering, as the wealth as some may imply the destitution of others is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark.²⁵

In simple terms, Sontag writes that documentary work allows the viewers a level of dissociative seeing, To some extent, I reject this idea because that “initial spark” that Sontag writes about can

²⁴ Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 9

²⁵ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 57

be enough to spur awareness and a movement. For example, the photographs of Emmett Till's mutilated body after his murder in 1955. The images of Till's body that circulated throughout the world ultimately sparked the Civil Rights movement. We can even look at the most recent murder of George Floyd. A random passerby recorded his murder on camera for the world to see, and it created major civil unrest during the summer of 2020. Bringing awareness through a photograph because that is all the documentarian can do at the time can be enough to spark change throughout the masses. While the photograph allows the viewer to distance themselves, the viewer is also allowed to choose how much time and energy they put into a photograph or a piece of work. In short, photographs can expose the cruelty of humanity and produce agitation and anxiety in a community that is being documented, but they can also create a mass movement of change.

Susan Sontag also writes about how "all photographs are memento mori"²⁶ in her book *On Photography*. She explained that photographs physically allow time to stop in our hands; we create a piece of time and a piece of a memory that is tangible. I found this concept interesting when thinking about the exploitative nature of documentary work. To elaborate, a photograph is proof that something or someone once existed, even when they are gone. Photographs are forever, and taking the time and the effort to make sure the documentarian is reflecting a community or a person appropriately is crucial in the filmmaking process. Additionally, by documenting a person, we are taking a part of them; their life, their time, their aura, and making it a piece of art. Just because the documentarian is producing a story of someone else's life does not mean that it is the documentarian's story. It is still the subject's story, and this is why informed consent and the constant research and understanding between ethical and unethical

²⁶ Sontag, *On Photography*, 15

practice is of the utmost importance throughout every process of the documentary storytelling process.

I am appreciative of the classes and the professors that I took during my first year of graduate school that taught me the importance of ethical and unethical storytelling. The readings, the notes, and the films we watched together helped me better understand how to tell stories accurately and respectfully.

CHAPTER 4 - PROCESS AND METHODS

The beginning of any documentary project can be daunting, especially if you do not know the communities personally with whom you are interested in working with. As a student documentarian, I learned that I should acquaint myself with a community before even thinking about pulling out my camera equipment. Documentarians can acquaint themselves with a community through research such as reading newspapers, articles online, or just a general history of the group or community that they will be working with. I preferred to spend one on one time with my subjects. This way I could explain my project and I could get to know them, but more importantly, they could get to know me. Because I attended a drag show in Tupelo in early October and felt comfortable reaching out to any drag queens who may be interested in working with me, I decided to contact one of my classmates who knew the organizers for the Tupelo drag show I attended earlier that month. I asked him if he could put me in contact with either the organizers of the drag show or the drag queens themselves so I could gauge their interest in a collaboration. Two Mississippi drag queens by the names of GoDiva Holliday (Eric White) and DeePression Holliday (Justin Holbrook)²⁷ reached out and let me know that they were interested, and invited me to the Link Center in Tupelo, Mississippi, to meet and film them as they were preparing for a charity fundraiser in Memphis, Tennessee, later that next night. I felt that it was rare for a person or a group of people to allow me into their space to film them before we properly met, so I took this as an opportunity to not interview them this first time, rather be a fly on the wall. Using my camera to observe, I would get to know them, but more importantly, they

²⁷ Note: throughout the thesis, if I'm referring to a queen by their drag name, I will use she/her pronouns, and if I am referring to them outside of their drag name, I will use their personal pronouns; for Eric and Justin, this is he/him.

would get to know me, my energy, who I was as a person and why I had taken an interest in them.

On a cold and cloudy Saturday afternoon on October 19, 2019, about one week after the initial drag show I attended for class, I drove to Tupelo to meet GoDiva Holliday and DeePression Holliday for the first time. Wearing an all-black outfit with rainbow sneakers, GoDiva met me at the door with a wide smile; the kind where the eyes crinkle at the side, the kind that is pure excitement. She grabbed some of my gear for me, and we headed up to her studio. I felt like we instantly clicked, and as a filmmaker, that is a really good feeling when it comes to building trust and getting to know a community. I met DeePression when I walked into the studio, and she was much more reserved and quieter than GoDiva. I took this as an opportunity to scope out my surroundings and talk to the two a little bit about who they were and how long they had been doing drag and I learned that GoDiva had been doing drag since 1999, and DeePression let me know that she had been doing drag since 2019. After getting permission to film the two putting on their makeup, I took out my camera, my SD cards, and my TASCAM recorder. The two were jamming out to Kelly Clarkson, and I was not sure if I would be able to use the rights to that music, so I just turned off the mic and let them do their thing. The much younger, inexperienced version of me might have been annoyed by the music and most likely would have asked them to turn it off--but instead, I used this as an opportunity to relax and just take everything in. This is what spurred my first project in the series, *Put on your Face* (2019). *Put On Your Face* is an observational documentary, or a fly-on-the-wall type of piece that truly showcases what it looks like behind the scenes of drag queens putting on makeup and getting ready for a show. Because the studio was so small, I had no choice but to make full use of the close quarters by completely (but intentionally) invading their space. With lots of awkward

laughter and leaning on their shoulders to get the shots I needed, I was able to fully capture every minute detail. Not only did this physically bring us closer, but it mentally and emotionally brought us closer as well, which is an important step when building trust in a community with whom a documentarian is working. After spending several hours with GoDiva and DeePression Holliday, I thanked them for their time and loaded my equipment into my car, where I was sure to write key details of the trip in my book of field notes before heading home.

Writing out field notes after every event or trip that pertains to a project I'm working on is a habit I picked up very quickly, as I rely greatly on my notes looking back at my projects. Details such as the location of the interview, the time, how long the interview lasted, as well as small details such as my subjects' clothing, their mood, and what the location of the interview site looked like are all important in painting a visual picture for myself when I'm looking back at these notes. While these details may not be necessary, it helps me as a filmmaker and a storyteller to reflect on different aspects of the interview so I can pick up on different patterns of my process as well as keep a record of my subjects' moods and emotional state throughout the project.

I immediately dumped my footage onto my computer and into my backup harddrive after I made it home from Tupelo. I use several backups where I can find my work just in case my work does go missing or if I end up with a corrupt file on one of my drives. After all of the footage is dumped, I organized all of the footage in one main folder with the date and the location as well as some sort of signifier of what is in that folder, and inside that folder, I have several subfolders titled "Interview", "B-Roll", "Audio", and "Stills". I will also add folders titled "Drafts" and "Final cut", and this is where I store all of my rough draft pieces and Premiere Pro files. After everything is organized and put into its respective folders, I go through and log

every piece of footage and audio that I have with a description of what the footage or the audio is, as well as in the order it was shot. For example, one file could look like this:

001_GoDiva Holliday Interview_Drag family and gender_November 16, 2019_Huff

Even though this work is tedious at the forefront, it ends up saving me time as an editor in the long run. Once I get everything organized and backed up, I'm ready to start transcribing all of my audio. I upload my interviews into a program called Temi that automatically generates transcriptions for me. This process does not take longer than a few minutes, and if you have decent audio, the transcriptions will be pretty accurate. I do not go through the time of fixing any errors, because I just use the document to physically see the conversation. Printing out the transcription allows me to read over the interview where I can highlight themes and take notes, as well as cross out portions that I don't need. Because the transcriptions also have timestamps, this helps me when I import the video and the audio into my Premiere Pro timeline, and I can find these quotes quickly without listening to an hour and a half of audio two or three times to find relevant information and themes to tease out a story.

Once I'm ready for my edit, I open Premiere Pro and start a new project, often creating two or three sequences after importing all of my files. I name these sequences "cuts", "skeleton edit", and "final draft". In the "cuts" section of my sequence, I drop the audio and the video into the sequence and synchronize the pieces. I hide the visual layer so I'm just listening to the audio, and this is where I start cutting down the audio, referring over to my transcription with my notes and highlights. The "cuts" tab is where I move freely, cutting portions out, moving sections around, and just overall playing with the feel and tone of the piece because all of the workshopping happens in this sequence. In the "skeleton edit" tab of my project, this is where I start to build the story out. I'll copy and paste pieces of what I had over in my "cuts" tab and

begin a more structuralized story and flow. This is where I build out a loose but coherent story that I end up listening to several times before I copy it over to the “final draft” sequence, where I will add B-Roll, title cards, and any other little pieces that I want to grab from the “cuts” tab or the “skeleton” edit tab. When I am editing, I do not work exclusively in one tab, but several, ultimately building out one final cut. In some cases, I’ll have three or four different versions, and I’ll duplicate those sequences so I can play around with different flows, music, or even story arcs. I duplicate these versions because I do not like to settle on one idea or one story, and I often move back and forth between these timelines until I finally feel like I have what makes a good story, pulling different ideas and elements from each. After I have my entire piece edited and set in concrete, I make my final touches, such as finishing up title cards, playing with transitions in the text, and most importantly, editing sound levels.

With my first piece *Put On Your Face* (2019), this process looked a little different. While I like to edit most of my pieces by listening to the audio first, I could not do that with this piece because there was not a lot of dialogue happening, and it would be a mostly visual piece anyway. After spending a few days with the cut, I exported the finished piece and I sent it to both GoDiva and DeePression Holliday. I shared my finished work immediately with my subjects because it does two things. First, it becomes another step in bonding and building trust with the community that I am working with. It is a simple yet effective way to show gratitude for allowing me to come into their space and document them. Second, it showcases my work and my ability to capture a story, as well as my seriousness about the project. Because it’s a collaboration, showing a piece of a project that I’m working on helps create a bridge to our working and professional relationship.

The next way I continue my relationships with my interviewees is by staying in contact and staying involved as much as I can. For me, this was traveling long distances to attend and shoot their shows. The first show that I attended after making contact with the two Holliday queens was on November 9, 2019, in Starkville, Mississippi. There was a drag show at Dave's Dark Horse Cavern starting at 9:00 pm that DeePression Holliday would be hosting. She asked me earlier that week if I wanted to attend, and I accepted the invite. I spent several hours filming the drag show, not entirely sure of what I was going to do with the footage. I was hoping that it would come in handy as B-Roll if I chose to continue the project.

One week after shooting the drag show event in Starkville, I booked on-camera interviews with both GoDiva Holliday and DeePression Holliday at the Tupelo Link Center. Each interview was about an hour and a half long, and before these interviews, I spent a few months researching and taking notes on the best way to conduct an interview by reading texts such as *The Oral History Reader* with articles such as "Learning to Listen" by Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack and "Towards an Ethics of Silence" by Alexander Freund. In Anderson's and Jacks' piece "Learning to Listen", I learned about the importance of being a good listener during an interview. One way we can do this is by pushing our own agenda out of the window and approach the interview with a balance of curiosity and research. It is important to note that certain interview techniques and approaches may deny certain groups of people the opportunity to explain and reflect on their stories. One question we can ask ourselves before an interview is, how can we broaden our interviews in ways that not only excite the subject but also keep them engaged? In order to fill the gaps in storytelling, it is crucial to allow space and time for the interviewee to elaborate on their thoughts and reflections, and as documentarians, we can achieve this by staying silent after asking a question. This allows the interviewee time to reflect

and answer the question fully.²⁸ While those silences may be awkward, it is much more awkward when someone is telling their story with interruptions from the documentarian.

Silence in an interview can indicate a myriad of different outcomes, and as a documentarian, it is necessary to know how to spot reticence, how to spot what kind of reticence it is, and how to respond appropriately. Silences can indicate the following during an interview, and each of these is worth considering when facing a silence:

- rejecting a request to answer a question
- discomfort, anger, fear, or distress
- censorship and suppression
- remembering or forgetting
- a loss of jurisdiction in the interview and regaining their agency
- careful consideration of the question²⁹

When a documentarian faces a subject who becomes reticent about a particular subject or inquiry on the interviewer's behalf, does it become unethical to push for a response from that subject?

There are benefits to being able to analyze the different types of silences, as it allows the documentarian to possess a level of insight and understanding of what the subject may be feeling during the interview process, and it becomes a valuable skill to gently entice the subject into unwrapping the puzzle pieces of history that otherwise would have gone missing. For example, an interviewee who may feel uncomfortable with a set of questions may intentionally censor themselves to gain control of the interview process, and the documentarian can mitigate this response by reminding the subject that they have total jurisdiction over what they talk about. Before my interview process, I always emphasize the importance of comfort during an interview; simply put, they do not have to answer any questions that they feel uncomfortable with.

There are also certain tricks that documentarians learn and apply while conducting an interview. While there is not necessarily a "right way" or a "wrong way" to conduct an interview,

²⁸ Anderson and Jack, "Learning to Listen," 180, 188

²⁹ Freund, "Toward an Ethics of Silence," 253

Charles T. Morrissey's piece "The Two Sentence Format as an Interviewing Technique in Oral History Fieldwork" illustrates how to maximize an oral history account or an interview for a documentary project. The ability to ask the right questions is what makes an interview successful, and coming prepared to do that can help the documentarian get everything they need out of an interview. By asking generalized questions and continually working up to the central issues at hand, the documentarian gains fundamental insight into the character and background history of their interviewee. Using the two-sentence format can optimize the interview. It also adds two important qualities when conducting an interview: rapport and collaboration. The first sentence in the two-sentence format is a generalized statement about the topic or an idea that the interviewee brought up, and the second sentence poses as a question that follows up that statement but asks a question that is relevant to the statement from the first sentence. For example, a two-sentence format may look like the following: "You mentioned that your family attended church when you were a child. How did religion and the church play a role in your life?" This format demonstrates that the documentarian is listening closely to the subject while also soothing the blunt force of challenging questions that the subject may be apprehensive about answering.³⁰

Lastly, I start my interviews with a more generalized set of questions, as it gives me a well-rounded idea of who my subject is and what they have experienced. I tweak my questions based on these answers so I can refine the interview in relation to my project. While I bring a set of questions to me with every interview, I rarely use all of them, but I do keep some on hand if the conversation becomes stagnant. Examples of questions I routinely incorporated for this process are as follows:

-What was your childhood like?

³⁰ Morrissey, "The Two Sentence Format as an Interviewing Technique in Oral History Fieldwork", 45, 46, 47

- Can you tell me about the role of religion in your life?
- What was your relationship with your parents like?
- What was your coming out story like to your friends and family?
- What drew you to drag?
- When and how did you first start participating in drag?
- What is your process? For example, what kind of makeup do you use, what kind of outfits do you wear, do you consider yourself to have a certain style or aesthetic that goes with your drag persona?
- What is the Southern inflection of drag? How does Southern drag differ from other regions in the United States?
- In which ways does gender play a part in drag? Is gender performative in drag?
- In which ways is drag tied to sexuality and gender (if at all)?
- Can you tell me a time that you experienced adverse reactions or harassment inside or outside of your community because of your LGBTQ status or as a drag performer?
- What is the cultural significance of drag?
- What is the Southern drag community like overall?

Using all of this research and information, I was able to capture and create a story about GoDiva Holliday and DeePression Holliday that truly highlighted not only the experiences of what it's like being a drag queen, but why they do it as well. In 2019, I created a fifteen-minute short documentary titled *Queering the South: Through Drag* that solidified my commitment to this project. The project was about the relationship between north Mississippi drag queens DeePression and GoDiva Holliday. While the story emphasized their relationship, the project also highlighted their own experiences as drag queens and what being a drag queen meant to them.

The next piece in my series, *Genderf*ck Drag*, is a short film about a queer drag nun Novice Sister Mixed Greens, who discusses their non-binary identity and how drag has allowed them to explore different avenues in expressing that identity. In their interview, Mixed Greens revealed that they were a fan of the bearded lady look while also incorporating “glass window pane art” on their face. The focus of this story was to capture how one non-binary person in North Mississippi explored their gender identity through genderfuck drag.³¹ In their story, they

³¹ For more, see <https://lgbt.wikia.org/wiki/Genderfuck>

illuminated the ways that their art brought out the concept that gender can be however you make it, and that femininity and masculinity are beautiful when mixed together.

I originally met Novice Sister Mixed Greens at a Starkville show back in November of 2019, and later realized that this was someone with whom I went to high school with. The week after the November 2019 Starkville drag show, I messaged them on Facebook. We instantly connected and chatted casually back and forth for several months before agreeing to an interview in early February of 2020. When I arrived at their house in Starkville, I picked a spot upstairs to do the interview. It was the only place in the entire house that did not have wooden flooring and large windows which ensured a space for clean audio, but the room was painfully empty. There was no art or photos on the wall, and the only scenic space was right in front of the window, which for lighting purposes, was not going to work. I chose a wall adjacent to the window for natural lighting and set up my equipment. The footage of the interview was boring, and it did not spark joy for me in any way. Knowing that information, I asked Mixed Greens if I could interest them in creating their entire makeup routine for me and their outfit, and I would film all of it. At the time, I was hoping that I would use most of this as B-Roll, and I decided to only shoot at 96fps. Shooting in a higher frame rate such as 96fps slows down the footage when dropped into an editing program. This creates a more cinematic experience, and I wanted to explore that option for my project. Additionally, as a documentary student with access to only one camera at a time, I never commit to only shooting at one frame rate, as I like the option of variety. However, because my subject was moving quickly in their routine, I was afraid that by stopping to toggle between different frame rates I would miss something important, so I settled on my camera setting at 96fps and hoped for the best.

When I got home and looked through my footage, I fell in love with what I had shot. I hated the footage of the interview, but I loved the way I shot their process in 96fps. The subject I interviewed for the project was situated against a purple wall, and nothing else behind them. In most cases, the documentarian will choose a space that is both aesthetically pleasing and makes the work look good from a technical perspective, but because my subject had just moved, the space was barren. The footage of the actual interview itself was (visually) boring enough that I believed it would have substantially affected the piece in a negative way. In the studio, Dr. Andy Harper agreed that the footage of the talking head interview was bland, and encouraged me not to put any visual footage of the interview in my film, rather use all of the slow motion B-Roll I had shot instead. I was hesitant at first because it was not something I explored before, but I was open to the idea because the interview footage was dull and monotonous. The piece ended up being one of my favorites out of all of the shorter projects I worked on, and I found a new style that I liked.

Because I was attending every drag show in North Mississippi, I had a lot of exposure to many different drag performers. I had begun working very closely with the director of the Tupelo shows, and because of this, I had access to the studios where other drag performers would be getting ready.³² I was particularly excited about a show in February of 2020 because I would be meeting a drag performer whom I was interested in working with. DeePression Holliday introduced me to the performer, Jada Lee Symone, and I spent most of the evening with her. We talked about her experiences as a drag performer, and I captured some photographs of her process. We chatted on and off for a few months, but by the time we nailed down an interview date, COVID-19 was spreading through the United States.

³² I always asked the performers permission to record in such a vulnerable state--being a drag queen requires putting on makeup and undressing which creates a vulnerability, and I wanted to create trust and rapport before I turned on the camera. Informed consent is incredibly important to me and the validity of my projects.

The world as we knew it stopped on a Friday. In Oxford, Mississippi, it was an incredibly sunny day--the air was warm as new signs of life sprouted from the ground, the barren trees from winter were finally blooming with bright green leaves and flower buds. Tiny bugs were finally emerging from underground, bees danced and zipped around outside of my window. On March 13, 2020, the President of the United States declared a national emergency because COVID-19 was spreading quickly throughout the country, and the United States went on immediate lockdown. Shortly after the national emergency announcement, students and staff received emails that classes would be going remote for the next two weeks. I received a text message from Dr. Andy Harper, and he asked me if I wanted to come to SouthDocs at Kinard Hall to pick up an MFA film kit “just in case” I needed it. After all, why not? We were only going to be in lockdown for a few weeks, and I probably wasn’t going to need the kit, but there was no harm with going in to pick up some film equipment. After all, it was “just in case,” right? On a warm and sunny afternoon, on April 18th, one month into lockdown, my partner and I carried our groceries inside, double-masked and double-gloved, and we carefully put every item we bought at the store on a towel on the floor. After opening up all of the windows and the doors, I sprayed down my groceries with disinfectant and carefully wiped each one off, strategically placing them in the pantry. It wasn’t until I threw off my gloves and my mask that I realized that we were in this for the long haul, and I did not even know when or how I was going to grieve the project that I originally envisioned for my master’s thesis. I just knew that everything was about to change, and I had no idea where to start.

I spent the next few months in a deep depression, never once touching the film equipment that I picked up from Dr. Harper in March. My anxiety was running wild, and everything that I worked on prior to lockdown felt useless. The many hours I spent traveling, researching,

conducting interviews, going to drag shows, and editing to eventually have a large, 30 minute film was slowly falling apart, and I was having a hard time letting go of the fact that my project was not going to be the project I initially envisioned. With all of the stress of living through the early stages of a world pandemic, I felt like something died inside of me. By the time mid-summer rolled around, the only thing I could do was stare at the camera equipment. Every day I walked by the equipment that was sitting in the corner of my living room, taunting me and reminding me of the project that wasn't going to get finished the way I had originally planned. It was true heartbreak at its worst.

To avoid feeling guilty for not working on my work, I spent a good bit of my time with some of the students in the Southern Studies program who were still in Oxford. On hot and sticky summer nights, with the cicadas roaring and the moon glowing bright amidst the humid Mississippi atmosphere, we would sit in a socially distanced circle and just keep each other company, and with sweat rolling down our backs, we laughed, we griped, and we wept. With booze in our hands, comparing ourselves to the world and everything happening around COVID-19, we felt so small and insignificant. We felt extreme guilt grieving the projects and relationships that were lost due to the pandemic while everything else was happening. What kept me going, however, was not being alone in those feelings. Most importantly, I needed to accept that in order for me to move forward, a part of me actually needed to die first. I finally let go of the project that I envisioned for years, and when I got home, I made arrangements for my first remote interview.

In late June, I reached out to drag performer Jada Lee Symone and retired drag performer Baby Holliday to see if I could interest them in a remote interview with me. After we chatted, I put the dates in my calendar and spent a week trying to find the best way to do a remote

interview. I asked a few questions about what materials and devices my subject had available. For this to work, I needed my subjects to have access to some kind of recording device, even if it was another phone. Jada Lee Symone did not have access to a computer, but she had access to another phone that could serve as a recording device. The reason for this extra recording device boils down to two issues. One issue is that with most smartphones, recording in a voice memo app is restricted during a phone call due to privacy concerns. The second issue is that you can use third-party apps to record phone conversions, but the quality is incredibly poor. I spent an hour or two researching the best free or low-cost third-party app to record phone conversations and even tested out five or six different apps myself having fake interviews with my partner, but the quality was too poor for me to consider it an option for my project. Next, Dr. Andy Harper and I discussed the possibility of mailing over a TASCAM recorder to my subjects, but there were several caveats to this as well. There was a chance the device would break during the transportation, it costs money to ship a device back and forth, and lastly, I would have to go through a small training process with each of my interviewees on how to use the device. It seemed like the option that made the most sense was to use a smartphone as a recording device via the voice memo app, but this causes accessibility issues as well. Most people I reached out to had some other device to record on, but there were a few subjects that did not and we decided to postpone our interviews until it was safe to meet again.

Once I got everything situated, I reached out to my interviewees the night before to bring them up to speed on the plan and asked them to download Zoom, to either their laptop or computer. While these would be oral histories with only audio, and I would not be using any footage of the conversation, I still performed the interview on Zoom to recreate as much in-person interaction as possible, while also acting as a backup device just in case the audio

failed on my interviewee's part. On the day of my first interview, I got my materials together (my notebook to take notes, my phone for extra audio, and my computer to conduct the interview) and logged on to Zoom. Using Zoom, I walked my interviewee through the voice memo app as a precaution to make sure that they understood what I needed from them, and why we were using two devices. I would use one of the devices for clean audio, and the other to conduct the interview. After the interview is finished, I ask my interviewee to email me the recording of the interview from their phone. During the first interview, we experienced multiple issues with the Zoom software. One issue that we ran into was faulty internet and wifi connections. The camera and audio freezing every other minute is not only awkward but can hinder the quality of the interview. It does so because when I inevitably miss key ideas or comments in the interview due to poor connectivity, it leads to knowledge-gaps that prevent me from fully understanding the story of my subject. To overcome this, before starting the interview, I find it useful to remind the interviewee that going remote can pose possible challenges, and to ask for their patience while going back and following up with some questions to make sure that I didn't miss anything.

The second issue I ran into was background noise that could have been avoided. Because I could not be present in the same room where the subject was, I could not create a controlled environment that is quiet and conducive to a good interview. Many people are at home with their families during this time, and it may be hard to expect a completely quiet space. Even on Zoom, it's difficult to hear what is going on around someone else, and I realized my mistake after I got the recording from my subject. In the background was a loud fire detector battery beeping every two minutes or so. I did not even think to listen for something like this, and it was even harder to have known when I was unable to hear it over Zoom in the first place. One way to alleviate this is before the interview starts, ask the interviewee to turn off any TVs or radios or move to a

quieter room if at all possible. It may also be helpful to ask the interviewee if there are any sounds that I cannot hear due to me not being in the room with them, and to assess whether or not those sounds would be acceptable in an oral history interview. Nonetheless, it's important to mention in the fieldnotes everything about the interview, and in this case, describe the situation, room, and the sounds where the remote interview took place. In my experience, listeners tend to be more forgiving when they are made aware of the sounds beforehand and they understand the circumstances of why they are happening.

As a student documentarian, I had been taught over and over that giving up control and letting a story naturally unfold is important to creating an authentic piece. With COVID-19 and being forced to move to an online format to conduct my interviews, this idea of giving up control during an interview took on a new meaning for me. As a storyteller, it's nerve-wracking to give up that jurisdiction of being in control during the interview process. There are so many things to consider when doing a remote interview. For example, what if the subject's device stops recording? Will they know to look down at the device every few minutes to make sure it's still recording? What if a loud truck or bus is driving by? As a filmmaker, there are many little things that are happening in the background of an interview that we keep track of, and teaching your interviewees to become documentarians themselves is a difficult process, and not everyone is up to the task. The only way to avoid this and guarantee you have total control over the interview is by taking the risk and doing the interview in person, but this is a difficult decision to make in the middle of an airborne pandemic.

Additionally, COVID-19 has made filmmaking a lot more difficult because the ethics of being a researcher and a documentarian comes into play. Who and what makes someone a good documentarian? In their article *Sexual Harassment and the Construction of Ethnographic*

Knowledge, Rebecca Hanson and Patricia Richards highlight the issues of reflexivity and embodiment as an ethnographic researcher during dangerous situations and scenarios, especially regarding sexual harassment and assault. While this article was written well before the COVID-19 pandemic and adheres more to the female body as a researcher, it poses the question of “what makes a good ethnographer?” In Hanson and Richard’s study, many participants believed that “doing anything for the data” matched the idea of being a good ethnographer and researcher, and how putting yourself in dangerous situations is associated with solitary research. Many respondents and researchers linked success with being the sole researcher in an ethnographic study, facing fieldwork head-on no matter how dangerous it could be was admirable. In the article, one participant expressed, “my want for information for the research was so strong that it trumped my needs for safety... you always want more, it’s never enough... I think that makes it hard to walk away from a situation where you could get some great data.” I thought this article was interesting as I was thinking about my own reflexivity and my responsibility as a researcher during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To elaborate, when I’m behind the camera, I feel like I’m an invisible researcher. A lot of my work and research is using the camera to observe and tell stories, and in that way, I can easily hide behind the camera. However, COVID-19 forced me to become hyper-aware of my embodiment in the field, especially when it came to my safety and others. Because it’s easy to think about the camera vs. my body, I was having to negotiate being in a space during a pandemic and what that meant for both myself and others. For example, in late October of 2020, one drag performer I worked with let me know that there was a drag show at a bar in Memphis that they wanted me to attend. After I asked several questions about the atmosphere of the show, I learned that it would be an indoor show and the performers and other guests were not required

to wear masks. I initially said yes to the invitation, thinking I could double mask and even wear a face shield, but later concluded that I did not want to put my safety or anyone else's safety at risk. Naturally, I was itching to get back into the field. I was desperate to find any excuse as long as I felt safe, but I failed to consider my reflexivity and what it meant to be a documentarian in the middle of a pandemic. I was obsessing so much about getting back into the field that the only thing I could think about was "if I feel safe, it should be okay." The ethics of going into this particular space in the middle of a pandemic, documenting, and coming home with the footage in an attempt to use it in my project seemed unethical for several reasons. I would be unintentionally putting the bar and other performers at risk for scrutiny because they were holding indoor drag shows during a pandemic. Even though I did not agree with the bar's decision to hold a drag show inside during a pandemic, I was also not going to be the reason why performers or this bar would be shut down or banned from further shows. If my project were critiquing the way communities handled emergency pandemics, then it would be an event I would attend, but the point of my project is to study the culture of drag in Mississippi. Additionally, even though I may have felt safe double masking and wearing a face shield, my presence as an extra body in an enclosed space still puts others at risk. With many asymptomatic disease carriers, I did not want to accidentally put someone else at risk, especially since I would be moving around the room and probably getting somewhat close with the drag performers who were unmasked. I forced myself to understand that my presence could be putting someone in harm's way.

Lastly, my health was at stake. For personal reasons, I did not want to become ill with the virus. I've often critiqued myself for this stance and had ongoing internal monologues with myself about this situation. As a documentarian who is required to go out into the field for my

research, should my health matter during a pandemic? Does this make me a bad researcher or a bad storyteller to put my health and safety at the forefront? Furthermore, as I started to ask these questions, I noticed that in my list of reasons not to document someone or an event, my health came last. What exactly was I trying to prove to myself or others? Before the pandemic, I was willing to go the extra mile to grab footage that I needed. Now that I was putting myself and my health at the forefront, I felt like the legitimacy and validity of my research would be taken into question; not by anyone in particular, but more rather, with myself. I too felt like in order to be successful, I needed to push myself beyond my comfort zone and gather research and document in spaces that were unsafe or going against the CDC guidelines. Not documenting during the pandemic is difficult when trying to finish a thesis, which is why it was important for me to pick and choose what I needed to focus on. I found my break when I found out that Mississippi United in Pride decided to hold the very first drive-in drag show tour in Mississippi as a response to the pandemic.

The drive-in drag show in Mississippi very much followed the same format of the drive-in movie theater that was constructed in the 1930s. Richard Hollingshead, the innovator of the first drive-in theater located in Camden, New Jersey, experimented with a 1928 Kodak projector fixed to the roof of his car, tying off a screen onto some trees, and hiding a radio behind the trees for sound, Hollingshead successfully figured out how to bring the theater outdoors, and in May of 1933, just one month before the opening of his theater called “Park-In Theaters, Inc.”, Hollingsworth received a grant for 30,000 for his idea, and by the late 1940s, drive-in theaters erupted all over the country.³³ There is this idea of the imagined, abstract space with the drive-in theater, where there is this crossing of the rural to the urban and the urban to the rural. Because

³³ “First Drive-in Movie Theater Opens.” History.com. A&E Television Networks, November 13, 2009. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/first-drive-in-movie-theater-opens>.

many of these drive-in theaters would require fifteen or more acres of land, the urban landscape intrudes the rural by tearing down and ripping up the earth in which the grass, shrubs, and trees have made their earthly homes to bring in concrete, bright neon signs, and an empty screen for years of entertainment. The rural landscape plays an essential role as well, by providing a space where outdoor activities can happen. However, in 2020, there is not a designer like Jack Corgan or a construction crew for the last-minute pop-up drag show. Because COVID-19 happened so quickly, the entertainment industry all over the United States had to contrive a plan swiftly to keep citizens happy and entertainers paid, all at a safe distance. Once again, people devised a plan around the rural landscape, and the drive-in theater and the drag show finally intersected.

I attended my very first drive-in drag show on November 21, 2020, in Oxford, Mississippi. It was a surprisingly pleasant and warm afternoon as I pulled into the South Rec Center on the Ole Miss campus, the location of that night's drag show. With an overcast sky but no chance of rain, the moon was peeping out of the clouds and the parking lot was empty, except for a black stage that rose about two feet off the ground with a red curtain backdrop. Colored LED lights also ran across the front of the stage. On the left of the stage was a screen. The screen was facing towards the audience, and it was meant to act as an extra set of eyes for those who were too far away to see the show. Behind the stage was a small curtained area where someone was running the sound with their laptop, and to the right of the stage were three tables set up with refreshments, balloons, glowsticks, and other merchandise for sale. A very loud generator was humming in the background, and I overheard worried conversations about it interfering with the music and the mic. GoDiva Holliday got out of her car at 5:00 wearing a bright purple dress and immediately walked over to see what the setup was like for the show. She was the host that night, and she wanted to make sure everything was running smoothly. As the sun dipped behind the

trees, fifteen minutes before showtime, I watched as the crew frantically started running around because the aux cord that ran to the laptop behind the stage to the speakers malfunctioned. By 6:00, the parking lot lights were glowing and fifteen cars were lined up in one row, patiently waiting for a drag show that was thirty minutes behind due to technical difficulties. GoDiva seemed to be in good spirits and cracked jokes about it while she announced the technical difficulties to the audience, but as soon as she stepped away from the mic she was nervous and frantically trying to help resolve the issues. At 6:15, the show finally kicked off, and people excitedly honked their horns and stepped out of their cars to sit on blankets. GoDiva Holliday, the first performer, lip-synced and danced to a remixed club version of Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You." Right at the climax of the song, the aux cord broke again, which cut off the music. As silence filled the air, GoDiva became visibly aggravated about the show's technical difficulties. After several minutes of toying with the sound, the crew fixed the issue and the show continued.

Because the show was outdoors, the drag queens did not have anywhere to dress. There is no dressing room when you are in the middle of a parking lot, surrounded by trees and cars. In-between each set, the girls would run over to their cars, publicly strip down to their bodysuits and pantyhose, and put on a new outfit with three or four other queens frantically helping them put on their dresses, their shoes, and their wigs. Grabbing jewelry and clothes out of their trunks, the queens hurriedly tried on their outfits before they took the stage. Only wearing a beige leotard and fishnets while scrambling to get her dress on, GoDiva Holliday said to me, "When you get in a situation where you are changing in a parking lot in front of folks, you don't give two craps. This is what it's like to throw up a drag show, literally, throw it up, in the middle of nowhere. This is not easy to do. Not only are you throwing a show together from the ground up,

but you're throwing a show together from the ground up in the woods. That's a huge deal. Bear with us, we know it's difficult when you first get started doing something... but nothing ever came easy, did it? Ever. And we as a [LGBTQ] community know that better than anybody."³⁴ GoDiva was stripping down and getting dressed right next to her car, in an open and public parking lot.

The intimacy and openness of seeing a drag queen undress publicly and change outfits in the middle of a drag show is truly a novel experience; it is a rare type of intimacy and closeness we have all been craving since the beginning of COVID-19, and it almost becomes metaphorical in a way--to physically and metaphorically undress, open yourself up, and say "Hey, I'm here, I'm me." If the circumstances were indoors, such as a theater or a bar, the queens would get dressed in a dressing room or a bathroom, the audience would not get to experience such openness. But because of COVID-19, and the drive-in drag show, the "behind the scenes" is accidentally part of the act. Behind the scenes becomes part of the performance, and the concept of gender-bending becomes transparent because as soon as the queen takes off the dress, the high heels, and the wig, underneath is a man's body - short hair, hairy chest, and fake breasts under the bodysuit. The performance of gender comes alive and is the embodiment of the drag queen. As Judith Butler states in her book *Gender Trouble*, "at its most complex, drag is a double inversion that says appearance is an illusion. Drag says my outside appearance is feminine, but my essence inside the body is masculine. At the same time, it symbolizes the opposite inversion; my appearance outside my body, my gender, is masculine, but my essence, inside myself, is feminine."³⁵ Butler emphasizes that gender is a societal construct, and drag worthy of analysis when we are looking at different ways that people parody and mimic gender in order to disrupt the gender binary.³⁶

³⁴ GoDiva Holliday, interview with the author, November 21, 2020

³⁵ Butler, 186

³⁶ Butler, 187

COVID-19 challenged how we see gender through the drive-in drag show. The drive-in drag show has made drag performances more abstract because as an audience, we are witnessing and understanding that there is a body underneath, and we are watching this visible transformation of a masculine entity into a feminine entity, and vice versa. Before the pandemic, we didn't see such transformations - the vulnerability of watching someone undress and become a brand new person highlights this idea that gender is a performance, and we can and are allowed to switch in and out of these persona's, and creating a "do it yourself" space where people can watch this happen not only highlights that fact but also challenges our ideas of what gender truly is.

The drag show lasted for two hours, and the queens utilized both the stage and the parking lot for their performances. Some of the queens walked up and down the line of cars and danced from a distance with the audience members who had gotten out of their cars. Some queens got in front of the cars and people in the cars would honk and flash their lights to the rhythm of the music, creating a makeshift light show for the queens; once again, a weird abstract way to create entertainment by utilizing the objects and space around us. A person who was working the event walked around with a red, stop-sign shaped cutout that reads "\$TIPS" on the front and a long pole with a net on the end where people would drop their singles into for each queen because both the audience members and the queens weren't allowed to get close to each other. One performer even wore a face shield during all of her performances.

I cannot help but wonder how the bombastic art form such as drag is only now being paired with a venue like the drive-in theater when the two seem so organic to each other, and it may be because this gender deviance caused so much anxiety that city officials wanted to keep these acts underground and hidden. For example, in his book *Welcome to Fairyland: Queer*

Miami Before 1940, Julio Capó explains at the beginning of Miami's development during the early 1900s, Miami's urban designers carved out interzones where sex, crime, gambling, and saloons would reside in the outskirts of Miami because it greatly interfered with the image of "respectability" that the community tried to paint during this time. There were even several ordinances and laws passed to keep interracial and queer deviancy in their place, as well as major efforts to get rid of red-light districts that were in Miami, which furthered the segregation between the Black middle class and the white elite. However, ironically, these attempts to establish boundaries between the white elite and the Black or queer middle class just exacerbated them; not only did sexual deviancy exist in these interzones, but they thrived due to community support within.³⁷ It's possible that city officials who were social moralists did not want these types of drag shows out and available for all of the public to see.

Regardless, the transformation of entertainment has shifted over time to accommodate mass industrialization, but in 2020, that change has been a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Holding shows outdoors is much safer than holding them indoors. The drive-in drag show has created a new form of accessibility for people who feel more comfortable staying in their cars for out-of-the-home entertainment, the way that drive-in theaters did almost a century ago. But instead of catering to comfort, the industry is now catering to safety, and this is an ongoing experiment and will continue until the eradication of the virus. While the drive-in drag show is an appealing route to entertainment, producers, entertainers, and the audience must prepare for issues that are out of their jurisdiction to be able to control, such as bad weather or a generator malfunction. There is no covering to block out rain, there is no electricity in the middle of the woods, if something were to fall apart during a show, what does everybody do? It truly is a

³⁷ Capó, *Welcome to Fairyland: Queer Miami before 1940*, 26, 45, 37, 47, 50

symbiotic relationship between the human race and the soil on which we live on. But more importantly, what does it mean to have queer space in these drive-in areas? Holding a drive-in drag show in public parking lots brings in a lot of different factors. It means more vulnerability, it means that there is more openness to who you are and your identity in a very public manner, and it normalizes queer space in public areas. There is a sense of power and entitlement that taking up space does for a person, but this type of public act also invites harassment from outsiders looking in.

The parking lot is also an incredibly awkward and abnormal space to hold a drag show, yet we have normalized the drive-in movie theater (and for some, even romanticize the idea). Will the drive-in drag show ever become a widespread event, even after the pandemic? Will we start to hold more outdoor shows like these and allow ourselves to connect to nature, or will we be going back inside once the pandemic is over and it is safe to do so? In some places, even in Mississippi, some drag shows are resuming indoors. There are many pros to holding a drag show indoors because there is more control over the lights, the sound, the music, and the overall tone and ambiance compared to an outdoor show.

The drive-in drag show creates a unique perspective and atmosphere when it comes to creating space for the LGBTQ community. When the LGBTQ community comes together and creates a space for events and parties, it is a communal and collaborative effort. One example of the queer community coming together despite numerous hurdles are the Dollar Parties that took place in Detroit, Michigan during the 1960s. Black queer women, in response to economic marginalization, established LGBTQ gatherings and dollar parties, where people would only have to pay one dollar to get into a club. Because of segregation in public spaces such as bars, many queer Black women felt that they did not identify with white queer feminists, and this was a way

for Black women to construct their own community with their own resources and connections. Not only did this help conceive community autonomy, but devised a pathway to lesbian communities.³⁸ The drive-in drag show in the middle of a global pandemic is just another way that the queer community has persevered through every roadblock that would have otherwise kept them at home. Creating these spaces is important because it helps construct and preserve LGTBQ community.

This pandemic certainly has forced me to move into unexpected places, and for that, I am grateful. That said, I also mourn the project that was lost. Fortunately, the main focus of this project was to explore LGBTQ culture through drag in Northern Mississippi, and I was still able to do that during the pandemic, even if some of the work was remote or attending outdoor shows.

³⁸ Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality Contested Space, and Feminist Activism*, 28, 29

CHAPTER 5 - SOUTHERN LGBTQ NARRATORS

The purpose of this project was to document LGBTQ drag performers in the South and create an archive of videos, photos, and audio documentaries of real-life accounts. Alongside that, I was also seeking to see if the American South held any significance to what drag meant to drag performers living in this region of the United States. It is important to note that every drag queen I interviewed for this project grew up in the American South and that they each felt that the South was home to ignorant and bigoted mindsets as a result of conservatism and religious piety. With Mississippi drag queen Justin Holbrook, (stage name DeePression Holliday), this was particularly true. Originally from Holly Springs, Mississippi, he says,

I grew up Pentecostal.... And to this day I still get a lot of backlash from the Pentecostal community because that is my hometown. They're not accepting. There was a lot of bullying involved. Growing up in a small town taught me a lot. Growing up in a small town, taught me, "get the fuck out and don't come back." When you are bullied, growing up in a small town like that, you are in such a bad place thinking, "Oh my gosh, there's nothing out there for me," but I moved away from that town. If I would have never moved away, I would not be the person that I am today. I can honestly say that moving away was probably the best thing for me. I moved an hour away from home, and my life completely changed. I'm so much happier. Growing up in that town was just tormenting.... The farthest that I've got was just backlash from some family that didn't have a damn thing to do with my life before drag, but felt the need to put input in my life about my drag and told me that I was going to hell and that I should kill myself over it. You'd be surprised at the amount of people that backlash about it. I've lost a couple of friends over it, but in the end, those people, if they weren't supporting me, they weren't needed in my life. There's a couple people that are like, "Oh, you dress too provocatively. You dress like a slut. You do this, you do that. You know-why don't you try a more contemporary version of it?" It's like, that's not who I am as a drag queen.³⁹

Holbrook also mentioned that he was a victim of cyberbullying while browsing Facebook marketplace looking for new dresses to perform in.

³⁹ Justin Holbrook, in-person interview with the author, November 16, 2019

I'm in this one group chat, that's like a buy, sell, trade for used prom dresses and other stuff. And I made a post on there and I was like, "Hey, girls warning. I'm a drag queen. And if you have a problem with that, please leave your negative comments somewhere else. I'm looking for dresses that are this size to this size, this color, through this color, willing to ship yada yada yada." And there were four people who 'haha'd' the post and two people mad reacted to it.... I was looking into buying a washer and dryer on Facebook MarketPlace, I was actually told, "I don't sell to no GD trannies" and blocked on Facebook while trying to buy a washer and dryer.

Eric White, (stage name GoDiva Holliday), faced many problems at a part-time job he worked between 2016 and 2019 in Fulton, Mississippi. He expressed that when his boss found out that he was gay, she cut all of his hours down to only two hours a week and taped bible scripture on the wall.⁴⁰ Mississippi drag queen Jada Lee Symone said that her classmates bullied her for being gay, and used theater as an outlet.

In middle school, I got really heavily involved in theater, and so with that I grew and learned my voice. And somewhere in there, I got really sick of getting picked on, and with theater came with confidence and the ability to improvise. And so whenever they would come at me, I came back with the words that were just like straight-up venom. I had a very smart mouth and that came from theater, I was able to say some stuff with a very direct tone -- with a very powerful energy... I feel like growing up here [in the South] being any type of LGBT person, you kind of have to ignite your own fire. And if you don't kind of ignite that fire, there are a lot of people that will extinguish the one flame you have.⁴¹

Retired drag queen Jack McCrory (Former stage name Baby Holliday) also experienced bullying for being gay.

I just tried to be invisible, which did not work out. I've never been the invisible kind of person, as much as I wanted to be before the age of 16 from kindergarten on, I just wanted to disappear.... But I knew I was different and I wanted to be different. I wanted to be okay with being different.... My biggest issue as I was growing up was I really wanted to be okay with how I was. Everybody does, and I think a lot of people don't understand what's going on with them as they're growing up. They know something's different, but they can't put their finger on it. For some reason, I always knew. I was always able to put my finger on it. I knew what was going on with me. I always had a name because I always heard the name. I knew what it meant.... I wasn't beaten up--

⁴⁰ Eric White, in-person interview with the author, November 16, 2019

⁴¹ Jada Lee Symone, Zoom interview with the author, July 20, 2020

severely beaten or anything like that. You know, the whole, 'we're going to put you in the garbage can--we're going to put your head in the toilet', you know, that kind of thing, pushing up against the wall or the lockers and calling you stuff. Which it all hurts, words hurt. But I was built tough. Thanks to my mom. And my dad too, my dad's a really tough guy. But a big class was 20 people which, for most schools, that's nothing--that's how many people are in the bathroom between classes now. But our whole class was 20 people and we were so big they had to split us up, we'd have two classes. So there was no blending in, I just stuck out like a highlighter, like a hot pink highlighter in the middle of a sea of beige. So I took it the best I could. Homelife helped. Not catching the same flack from my family and people in my away place, you know, my safe place. So I did have a safe place. I think that was important and helped me a lot.... but I detached myself from school.... I was the one being picked on by everybody. It didn't matter the age.⁴²

One question I asked all of my subjects was if they were assaulted in any way for their LGBTQ identity. While no one was physically hurt, Eric White expressed that he was almost assaulted after a performance.

So we're at this bar and we're all standing out in the parking lot and there are these groups. You've got a group here and a group here, and a group here, and then our little group here--you know how it is after a night of hanging out and everything, everybody's saying goodbye or whatever. So I'm talking to my group--and I think that this is why it bothered me so much is because I didn't even see it coming. It was out of nowhere. I see this hand coming at my face, I see it and it happened so fast and I jolted backwards.... I turn around and look and it's a friend's brother who tried to knock me the hell out and I go, "what the eff?" I lost my shit for a second. And he was like, "I can't be hanging around with no faggots." And I lost my shit. Like my friend grabbed my arm and I lunged towards him a little bit. I was like, "what is your problem? You know, I'm not even hanging out with you. I don't even know you. I haven't even looked at you. I didn't even know you were there...." So it's really silly that the fact that the one time that my safety was at risk, I didn't even see it coming. I think that's kind of how it happens a lot. People don't even see it coming, and they're just attacked.⁴³

The idea of drag and gender interested me, and I wanted to know what my subjects thought about the topic. Drag queens, drag kings, and other gender-nonconforming performers test the grounds in which gender is a socially constructed concept by combining aspects of heteronormative cultures and LGBTQ cultures in their performance identities, some more than others, which helps illustrate the concept that gender is merely a facade which we uphold in our

⁴² Jack McCrory, Zoom interview with the author, July 22, 2020

⁴³ Eric White, interview with the author, November 16, 2019, edited for clarity

everyday interactions and activities⁴⁴. What's interesting, however, is how drag performers feel about deconstructing gender through drag, and whether or not it's their main intention in this work. For some of the drag queens that I interviewed, this was the main intention of their work. For others, it was just about playing a different role and persona as entertainment. For Eric White, he said drag helped him figure out his gender identity.

If you were to take a picture, like a timeline of my life, especially from being very young, you would see that I was very into makeup, and I would wear t-shirts on my head for hair.... And I would wear a tablecloth around my waist because I always wanted to skirt on. And for a long time, I felt like a lady. And for a long time, I felt like I was a lady-- why am I in this body? Why are they making me play with balls and stuff like that when I really just want a Barbie and to be left alone kind of deal? Go play with my Barbie dream house, things like that. But as I've gotten older, especially for drag, I've embraced the masculine side of things. And I feel like I dilly-dallied in drag, like, real drag, like comedy, and raunchiness and breaking it down--breaking down the barriers where you're not just impersonating a female, you're really there for comedic relief. Old school drag.... So, I definitely see where people would get involved in this because they want to reach that feminine side of themselves. I do feel like it's a lot of gender-bending. A lot of people start off [doing drag] thinking, "Maybe I am trans, maybe I'm a woman trapped in a man's body, can this be my outlet to explore that?" I feel like most drag queens go through that. It was a good experience for me to go through that because I know now, without a shadow of a doubt, that I'm just a dude in a dress.⁴⁵

By concluding that he is just a “dude in a dress”, White is able to understand and distinguish trans identities and cis-gendered identities. Performing as a woman on stage made him realize that for him it's the performance, the self-expression, and the art that draws him into doing drag and that he can move in and out of this persona. Retired drag queen Jack McCrory did not align himself with using drag as a way to explore his gender identity, rather it was a way for him to play dress up and feel pretty.

I think drag itself is gender-bending, right? I would say it's gender-bending and 100% gender-bending. No matter which angle you go at it from, you know, whether you want to be a drag queen or a drag king, or if you want to just go out [and perform] with no hip

⁴⁴ Greaf, “Drag Queens and Gender Identity,” 655.

⁴⁵ Eric White, interview with the author, November 16, 2019

pads and no boobs and just be a boy with a bare chest and a face full of makeup and no wig-- whatever you want to do, as long as you're entertaining--that's all I ask, is be entertaining. No matter what you're doing, if you're going to be on stage, just be entertaining.... I never wanted to be a girl, I'm not transsexual. I know I'm not transsexual. I love being able to take the tits off. I don't want to have to take [the tits] to the shower. That's just too much extra stuff to wash.... It's like Halloween, but every weekend, and that's the best cause I love Halloween. I love dressing up for any reason. I don't care what it is. And drag was just a wonderful excuse to look fabulous and get paid for it. So, that's what drew me to drag. It seemed like a lot of fun. And who doesn't want to be pretty? Everybody wants to be pretty at some point.⁴⁶

This interview is interesting because even though McCrory knew from the beginning that he did not identify as a woman and that he was not performing drag to experiment with his gender identity, he felt like drag was a way for him to "feel pretty." This quote is worth analyzing because this speaks a lot about American culture and its expectations of men to be macho and that men cannot embody "prettiness." While there are many reasons why people perform drag, this illustrates that some people feel like they need to transform themselves to feel validated and seen and that they can do so through performing drag. The idea of men not being able to access these emotions of "feeling pretty" is exacerbated by societal pressure on gender roles, gender display, and gender accountability,⁴⁷ which worsens in places such as the American South where more conservative views take place.

In contrast, drag performer DeePression Holliday highlights the importance of gender and gender identity in drag.

Gender can play a big role in drag because as of lately, I've seen more and more of what I call a "fem queen", which means a biological woman who plays a drag queen.... There are also transgender men who play as drag kings....Now, it's hard to say that it does play a big role because it has gotten to the point where you can be a biological man or a biological woman and still do drag as that same-gender portrayal. You don't have to reverse the role just to do drag, you can do it as your current gender, you're just expressing a different side of yourself....I mean, when I'm in drag, I'm not the same person. As a boy, I have flamboyant tendencies, but I'm not the gayest "McGayerson" person that walks around the street, I guess, is the best way to say it. I can be pretty gay.

⁴⁶ Jack McCrory, Zoom interview with author, July 22, 2020, edited for clarity

⁴⁷ For more, see Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman's article "Doing Gender"

I've gone as far as having rainbow hair. I carried a purse as a boy a couple of times, but to say that gender plays a big role in it is not truly accurate in my opinion. Gender doesn't define you. Your gender does not define you as a drag queen or who you are as a person.⁴⁸

Even though DeePression Holliday expressed to him that gender does not define who or what a person is, non-binary Mississippi queer drag nun uses drag to understand and explore their gender identity better.

I am a nonbinary person. I describe my gender as being agender, or the absence of having a gender. It's not so much overly masculine or overly feminine, but I put myself in the camp of neither.... Generally, when we think of drag we think of it as being the biggest, the loudest caricature of a gender.... Genderfuck drag does that, but it's more about taking the idea of taking a gender and throwing it in the trash. Or, taking aspects of different gender identities and mashing them together into something big and beautiful and over the top.... My style definitely involves the 1920s bearded lady archetype. And it's been really fun being able to take this body that I live in and make it look the way I want it to.... Being able to change this body and contour it in different ways.... And having a none-gender-identity, drag is really helpful because it lets you explore those things. I struggle a lot with what I want to do with my body. I've thought about getting surgery to make myself look more, I guess, "right" to me, or to do any sort of hormones. And being able to explore this [genderfuck drag] and being able to change it and have it be very fluid, has been really helpful in helping me decide what I want to do. And I'm still not at a point where I'm ready to make any decisions, but it definitely helps me be more comfortable in the body and the existence I have right now, even if I only look my favorite way on the weekends.... I like being able to shade different parts of me to make myself look different. I like to paint my face up like stained glass windows sometimes.... Just being able to paint my face different colors and put a beard on there... or cover myself in glitter or feathers or pieces of paper sequence, it makes me feel almost like a kindergartener's art project. And that's probably my favorite way to present myself, just looking like I dipped my face and mod podge and then jumped into a Joann's clearance rack.... But being able to paint my face however I want it to look like, and throw on a wig or a hat, or wear a ridiculous, elaborate costume and stomp down the street, and do a little wink and a little wiggle is one of my favorite things.⁴⁹

Because Sister Mixed Greens is a non-binary person and they define themselves as having an absence of gender, they struggle with what they want to do with their body. By being able to paint their face with makeup, they can experiment by assembling our different ideas of

⁴⁸ Justin Holbrook, interview with the author, November 16, 2019, edited for clarity

⁴⁹ Sister Novice Mixed Greens, in-person interview with the author, February 23, 2020

gender, such as contouring their face in a way that creates a mustache and a beard while also wearing a dress, and create new ideas and expectations of gender. Not only are they exploring all of the avenues in all of the different types of gender demonstrations, but they are also transforming their body into an artistic statement through our ideas that gender is a fluid concept. For this performer, their drag persona may link with how they internally feel, and they are using drag as an outlet and a place for safe exploration.

One of my biggest questions during my research and interviews was trying to understand the Southern inflection of drag because drag in the Southern portion of the United States serves an uncommon advantage in understanding the different types of perspectives of gender, gender identity, and gender expression. The prejudice towards LGBTQ people in the South makes it difficult for queer folks to access resources such as health care, support groups, and employment, so some nonbinary, genderqueer, and trans community members pursue drag performance identities in order to experiment with both their existing and new gender identities in a safe space without the fear of repercussions from the outside world.⁵⁰ Despite these challenges, the LGBTQ South does exist, and to suggest otherwise (ie: to suggest that queer life only thrives in metropolitan areas or large urban areas) is both elitist and ignores the presence of gay, rural Southerners.⁵¹ Even though I made it a point to not steer the conversation one way or the other when it came to talking about the distinctions of drag in the South, all of the drag performers that I interviewed argued that the South was a unique space to study drag and that they believed that it was a much different experience compared to the rest of the United States. For example, Eric White said,

I'm going to tell you the one thing that to me, Mississippi drag is different from any other drag in the nation. And it's something that I'm teaching my drag daughter and anybody else that I work with, is that it's about hospitality. You don't go up--if somebody is kind enough to come up to you and give you a dollar, you don't snatch that dollar and walk away. You give them a hug or a nod or you bow or you acknowledge the fact that they're

⁵⁰ Rogers, "Drag as a Resource: Trans* and Nonbinary Individuals in the Southeastern United States," 903, 892

⁵¹ Baker and Kelly, 47

giving you their hard-earned money. It's a dollar, but they mustered up the courage to come up and tip you and you give them a little something extra, even if it means that you don't get to just work your whole song. There is nothing better to me, being a Southern drag queen, than spending my entire song just hugging people and taking money and just loving on them. That happened at Tupelo Pride this year. I could not leave--I was squatted down at the edge of the stage and could not leave the stage because I was meeting and greeting every single person as they came up there was a line all the way to the back of the room. And it's a beautiful thing when that happens, and so rare these days. But I think to me, that's a Southern thing. If you go to New York and stuff, they go to tip you or whatever--you go to tip them --they take your dollar and they're just smiling. They just keep on working. To me--they'll go through and they'll snatch, snatch, snatch, snatch, snatch the dollar bills--all the hands are out and they just snatch them all together... I don't do that. I acknowledge that person. And I think to me that's one of the big things. Another thing that I do that is definitely Southern is I meet and greet at the door. When you arrive to my show, I'm standing at that door and I'm like, "thank y'all for coming." I'll be hugging people. We have a time that the doors open, it's like 7:00 PM. I will go outside to where the line is around the door before 7:00 PM and walk up and down the line meeting people. I did that in Oxford, too. Like when they would come to Proud Larry's or wherever we were having a show. I walk up and down that line. I'll say, "thank y'all for waiting in the cold or thank y'all for sweating it out here..." That's a very Southern thing. I don't know anybody anywhere else that the Queens come out while people are waiting outside and meet and greet and all that good stuff.... Like, these are my people. I want to know who you are. I want to meet you. I'm going to come to your table and visit.⁵²

Justin Holbrook also attests to the fact that in the South, the drag scene is much different compared to the rest of the United States. He says,

If you had to compare drag the South to drag out East or out West or up North, I would say Southern drag is comparatively different because we don't have these big bars that have four or five shows a night. If you go to a big town, you're going to have a bar that's going to have a show at seven o'clock, a show at nine, o'clock a show at 10:30, a show at midnight and a show at 2:00 AM. Up there, they get drag all the time. The people in this area are true fans of us because they know they're going to have to travel to Oxford. They know they're going to have to travel to Tupelo. They know they're going to have to travel to Starkville to go to see their queen. Everyone ends up with their queen, or even their group of queens, that they love. But Southern drag--and I almost hate to say this, but we're local celebrities. There's not really a creative outlet for drag in this area. There's very few. So, for us to get together and perform in the South shows a lot. Living in a homophobic, bigoted racist part of the state, the Bible Belt; it's a big deal for us to be able to get together and perform and put on our heels and put on our lashes and sashay. I mean, ask Eric, he was arrested for doing drag. It's come a long way in the time that I've been doing drag, but I couldn't imagine how bad it was back in the day. They used to sneak around to bars and have to hide their drag. I don't know how I could hide it. But

⁵² Eric White, Interview with the author, November 16, 2020, edited for clarity

living in the South is good and bad on its days. We run into bigots sometimes, but living in the South -- it can be a good thing because you get to expand your drag more. If I lived in a town like New York City and they have drag shows all the time, I would be a goldfish in a shark pond, but in the South, we are a whale in a fish tank. We have so many more opportunities to go to different places and to meet different people. If I lived in a really big city, I would have to really do some work just to get into a show or get my name known. I'd have to go on RuPaul to get my name known-- something huge just to get some recognition, but in the South, it's more abundant with their recognition because it's so few and far in between that the little bit of recognition that we are getting means a lot to more, and it means a lot to the people that are coming to these shows. I can think of people right off hand that come to every single show that we ever have. And if they can't make it--they will make it, they will find some way shape, form, hitch, a ride or walk if they had to. They're diehard fans in this area. And I feel like if I lived in a town up North, it wouldn't be the same.⁵³

Jack McCrory noticed that the performance aspect of drag in the South was a lot different in comparison to places such as New York or California.

It's a completely different kind of drag. Every area of the country has its own kind of drag. Like so many New York queens will do this off-the-wall look and they'll sing live. And that's true for a lot of super metropolitan areas. Places in California, bigger cities in California, they have the same kind of drag. But I think in the South, we-- and I don't know why we did, I don't know if it's that old South mentality where we want to stick to the glamour and glitziness and not do the off the wall show. We do have a lot of really interesting characters out there, but again, the majority I think of Southern drag is that almost like pageant drag, it's more female illusion than drag. Even though I never considered myself a female illusionist, because I've never seen a woman this big--I was straight up a dude in a dress. I never 100% believe that ever really looked like a woman. But that was what I was aspiring to ultimately. I wanted to be the rich-looking Hollywood type-- that ultimate glamour. I didn't want to do the crazy stuff. I wasn't really comfortable doing the super slutty stuff, which nothing wrong with it. Somebody's got to do it and I love to watch it. I think that ultimately is the biggest difference, is that a Southern drag, I think sticks more to female impersonation. It's not as campy generally.⁵⁴

These interviews are important because they bring the research to life. When real voices are part of a project, not only do they create an in-depth and detailed understanding of the topic, but they also help to remove biases. The interviews I used for this project highlighted several important key issues that I felt like I wanted to explore in my project. First, the accounts of my

⁵³ Justin Holbrook, Interview with the author, November 16, 2019, edited for clarity

⁵⁴ Jack McCrory, interview with the author, July 22, 2020

subjects confirmed my hypothesis and research that the South is prejudiced against the LGBTQ community. Second, these case studies helped me understand that drag and gender do not necessarily correlate, as many may presume. Instead, it is truly contingent on the person and their feelings about their own gender identity and that those feelings are in no way monolithic. Third, I learned from the performers that they believed Southern drag performance is vastly different compared to metropolitan areas, especially areas that resided outside of the Southern portion of the United States such as New York or San Francisco. While I wanted to draw a correlation between drag performance in the South being vastly different due to the biases against the LGBTQ community, I felt that I did not have enough case studies or research to make that idea conclusive. Instead, with these case studies, I was able to highlight the uniqueness of Southern drag and bring their stories to life.

CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSION

As I conclude this thesis, all I can think about is how fortunate I was to be able to work with and capture so many beautiful and diverse voices. Before I started my work, I would frequent gay pride shows such as Code Pink⁵⁵ in Oxford, Mississippi, and relish the small but charming drag shows where people would sing, dance, and perform a multifaceted art form. Throughout my thesis, I learned so much about drag culture and the people in it. Instead of studying drag performance at face value, I dug deep into the lives of these performers as well. I learned about their personal lives, their home life, and their biological families. I learned about drag families, the importance of them, and how new drag performers are initiated into these families. I learned about the ins and outs of being a show director. I learned about the struggles of being a drag performer in the South, such as harassment and violence, but I also learned about the delights of being a Southern drag performer as well. I spent as much time as I could behind the scenes, and I was shocked at how monstrous the drag community was, and by the end of my thesis, I realized that I not only dipped my toe into a lake, but a massive ocean.

Being able to immerse myself in a culture such as drag proves that there are pockets of queer diversity in northern, Mississippi, a space that I think many people living outside of the South would be surprised by, given the conservative nature of the Bible Belt. When I first started this project, I remember trying to do research on drag in the South, and I remember feeling very

⁵⁵ Code Pink is an LGBTQ dance party often hosted by one of the bars in Oxford, Mississippi. Many of these performances host drag shows, bands, and other forms of entertainment, often during major holidays such as Halloween or Valentine's Day.

frustrated by finding hundreds of articles and books on drag and performance in itself on a global scale, but not very many resources on drag specifically in the American South. With the South being so rich in history with conservative cultures and religious values, I was hoping that I would find some interesting data, films, journals, articles, and books about LGBTQ night life in the South. While I did find some, it was scarce. The purpose of this project was to add to the small collection of Southern LGBTQ resources for other historians, scholars, or the general public who are interested in this topic.

While the different topics and ideas in drag performance are massive, there are a few takeaways that I learned from my own research as a scholar and as a documentary student that I particularly wanted to highlight in this project. On both the historical side and the documentary side, I learned that during the late 1800s and early 1900s, most drag in the South and its meaning behind it differed compared to drag in the North. While this piece was not a comparative piece, I did find it interesting to see how Northerners used drag to challenge and critique gender roles, whereas in the South, drag was used to ease race, class, and gender anxiety and solidify heteronormative structure. On a contemporary note, I learned from my LGBTQ narrators that drag differed in the South by the different attitudes that they held about their audience members. According to my narrators, because drag Northern areas are more common than in Mississippi, both drag performers and the audience are exposed to this type of environment perpetually. Drag in the South is more scarce, therefore the people who show up to each show are more likely to support and travel to see their favorite drag performer. Additionally, Southern drag performers believed that they are friendlier and more hospitable compared to their Northern counterparts. I also learned that drag and the reasons why people do drag is not a monolithic experience. For some, drag performers turned to drag because they enjoyed the

entertainment aspect of it, while others turned to drag because they learned to use drag as a way to explore a new identity.

Throughout this project, I also learned how to be a better documentarian and a better scholar. I took several gender studies and queer history courses throughout my time as a graduate student to help me think more critically about the work I was doing. I also took the time to research and study the various factors that made a documentarian successful. One way I achieved this was through studying the different interview techniques and practiced them while in the field. I learned how to extrapolate information out of my interviewees and gauge their interest in order to tell the best story possible.

More interestingly, I learned what it was like to be a documentary filmmaker in the middle of a pandemic. There were many hurdles I had to overcome, the biggest one being my own mentality and forcing myself to give up the project I had originally envisioned. For almost half a year, I did not attempt to document anything. I was scared I was not going to like the outcome, and my idea that our lives would go back to normal soon enough so I could finish my project was hanging by a thread. It took me almost six months to realize that the platform was going to have to change, and looking back, I wish I hadn't waited so long. I genuinely did not know how long the pandemic would last, and I would have never thought that I would only have six months out of my two-year program of COVID-19 free interviews before the world changed. I feel insanely fortunate to have what I captured before the pandemic, but I regret the time I did not spend filming and collecting stories while in lockdown. Looking back, there are many things I would have done differently. I would have set up more outdoor interviews and more Zoom interviews. The pandemic was a massive lesson for me in that you have to roll with the punches, no matter what.

While I had originally planned for a feature-length film before the COVID-19 pandemic, this multi-modal thesis of films, photos, and audio documentaries highlights the importance of community engaged projects. Because I switched gears in how I was going to present the LGBTQ community by showcasing them on a website with different kinds of mediums as well as quotes and texts that helps further explain the project, the scope and the reach of my audience naturally broadens. Being able to present this project this way on a website makes the work much more accessible, and it also builds a type of trust, development, and rapport between the LGBTQ stories and the audience. This project shows that the LGBTQ community is creating space in the conservative South and that they are thriving.

This work is not finished. I have started filming outdoor drag shows and making plans to attend indoor drag shows as more and more people in Mississippi are getting vaccinated. I am planning to set up more in person interviews with the hopes I can create a feature length film about drag in Mississippi as a whole, and one thing that I am ironically really excited about is to hear the stories of drag performers who had to switch up their routine in order to keep performing because of the pandemic. This pandemic has inspired me to get back out into the field to collect as many stories as I can to make up for lost time. The documentary work never stops.

Bibliography

- Alexander Freund. "Towards an Ethics of Silence." In *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd ed. Routledge, 2016.
- Baker, Ashley A, and Kimberly Kelly. "Live like a King, y'all: Gender Negotiation and the Performance of Masculinity among Southern Drag Kings." *Sexualities* 19, no. 1–2 (February 2016): 46–63.
- Bean, Annemarie. *Female Impersonation in Nineteenth-Century American Blackface Minstrelsy*. New York University, Graduate School of Arts and Science, 2001.
- Bolze, Thomas Arthur. *Female Impersonation in the United States, 1900-1970*. State University of New York at Buffalo, 1994.
- Boyd, Nan Alamilla. *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*. First edition. University of California Press, 2005.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>.
- Capó. *Welcome to Fairyland: Queer Miami before 1940*. Illustrated edition. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017.
- Carter, J. Scott, and Casey A. Borch. "Assessing the Effects of Urbanism and Regionalism on Gender-Role Attitudes, 1974-1998*." *Sociological Inquiry* 75, no. 4 (November 2005).
- Connell, Catherine. "Doing, Undoing, or Redoing Gender?: Learning from the Workplace Experiences of Transpeople." *Gender & Society* 24, no. 1 (February 2010).
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0891243209356429>.
- "Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections," n.d. <https://uselectionatlas.org/>.
- Duncan, Anne. *Performance and Identity in the Classical World*. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Editors, History.com. "First Drive-in Movie Theater Opens." HISTORY, n.d.
<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/first-drive-in-movie-theater-opens>.

- Enke, Finn. *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism*. Illustrated edition. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2007.
- Greaf, Caitlin. "Drag Queens and Gender Identity." *Journal of Gender Studies* 25, no. 6 (November 1, 2016): 655–65.
- Hanson, Rebecca, and Patricia Richards. "Sexual Harassment and the Construction of Ethnographic Knowledge." *Sociological Forum* 32, no. 3 (September 2017): 587–609.
- Huff, Christina. Eric White (GoDiva Holliday) Interview, November 16, 2019.
- Huff, Christina. Interview with Jack McCrory (Baby Holliday), July 22, 2020.
- Huff, Christina. Jada Lee Symone Interview, July 20, 2020.
- Huff, Christina. Justin Holbrook (DeePression Holliday), November 16, 2019.
- Huff, Christina. Green (Mixed Greens) Interview, February 23, 2020.
- Huff, Christina. Eric White (GoDiva Holliday) Interview, November 21, 2020
- Johnson, E. Patrick. *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*. Univ of North Carolina Press, 2011.
- Joseph, Channing Gerard. "The First Drag Queen Was a Former Slave | The Nation." Accessed March 22, 2021. <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/drag-queen-slave-ball/>.
- Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, Taylor, & Francis Group, 2015.
- Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack. "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses." In *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd ed. Routledge, 2016.
- Levitt, Heidi M., Francisco I. Surace, Emily E. Wheeler, Erik Maki, Darcy Alcántara, Melanie Cadet, Steven Cullipher, et al. "Drag Gender: Experiences of Gender for Gay and Queer Men Who Perform Drag." *Sex Roles* 78, no. 5–6 (March 2018): 367–84.
- Michael Bronski. *A Queer History of the United States*. Beacon Press, 2012.
- Morrissey, Charles T. "The Two-Sentence Format as an Interviewing Technique in Oral History Fieldwork." *The Oral History Review* 15, no. 1 (1987): 43–53.
- Newton, Esther. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. 1st edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

- Rogers, Baker A. "Drag as a Resource: Trans* and Nonbinary Individuals in the Southeastern United States." *Gender & Society* 32, no. 6 (December 2018).
- Russell, Thaddeus. "The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality." *American Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2008): 101–28.
- Somerville, Siobhan B. *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*. 1st edition. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2000.
- Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York, N.Y: Picador, 2003.
- Stone, Amy L. "The Geography of Research on LGBTQ Life: Why Sociologists Should Study the South, Rural Queers, and Ordinary Cities." *Sociology Compass* 12, no. 11 (November 2018).
- Thompson, Brock. *The Un-Natural State: Arkansas and the Queer South*. 1st edition. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2010.

VITA

EDUCATION

Bachelor of Arts (May 2017) in Art and Southern Studies, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi.

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

Circulation Worker, J.D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, January 2013-July 2017.

Student Intern, Ole Miss Sports Productions, University of Mississippi, November 2014-May 2017

Graduate Assistant, Ole Miss Sports Productions, University of Mississippi, July 2019 - August 2020

Graduate Assistant, Emmett Till Interpretive Center, August 2020 - Present

PRESENTATIONS/CONFERENCES

Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies, University of Mississippi, March 2021

AWARDS

Outstanding Body of Work Award, University of Mississippi, Department of Theater Arts, May 2016

Best Mississippi Short at the Oxford Film Festival, Oxford, Mississippi, March 2021

Best Documentary Short at the University of Mississippi Film Festival, Oxford Mississippi, April 2021

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP

The Honor Society at Phi Kappa Phi, University of Mississippi Chapter, November 2020

RESEARCH INTERESTS

Documentary filmmaking, women and gender studies, LGBTQ studies