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SEEING QUEER JOY IN MISSISSIPPI:
PRIDE PARADES IN TUPELO, STARKVILLE, AND OXFORD

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Fine Arts

Degree

The University of Mississippi

Ellie Campbell

August 2022

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ABSTRACT

In May of 2016, Oxford, Mississippi, held its first LGBTQ+ Pride parade in recent memory. That first Oxford Pride was part of a wave of LGBTQ+ celebrations that began in the state in 2015 and 2016 and continue to the present day. Though the pandemic forced many to cancel or go online, communities across Mississippi have continued to organize Pride parades and other celebrations of LGBTQ+ identities since 2015, a marked contrast from earlier periods.

In a state often depicted as actively hostile to queer people, these Pride events make queer southern communities visible in new ways, while also revealing limitations understanding and organizing around queerness in the South. For this MFA thesis project, I documented three Pride events in north Mississippi: Tupelo's first in fall 2018, Starkville's second in spring 2019, and Oxford's first after the onset of the pandemic, in the summer of 2021. Documenting these Pride parades and events in Mississippi reveals two truths: the state can be both an oppressive place for queer Mississippians and a space of joy. Focusing on these events foregrounds the strength and joy of the community without forgetting or erasing the violence or despair.

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I would like to first thank John Howard, for writing the book that paved the way for everyone else's scholarship on this subject and giving us a better way to understand Mississippi. I would also like to thank Jaime Harker for her work on the queer (and lesbian!) South, for another terrific lens.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER TWO: TUPELO.....	14
CHAPTER THREE: STARKVILLE.....	30
CHAPTER FOUR: OXFORD.....	45
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	60
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	69
VITA.....	75

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In May of 2016, Oxford, Mississippi, held its first LGBTQ+ Pride parade in recent memory. Around 400 people (myself included) marched from the Depot in the Gertrude Ford Center parking lot, up University Avenue, through the square, and down West Jackson.¹ Several hundred more people turned out on the square to cheer on the parade. That first Oxford Pride was part of a wave of LGBTQ+ celebrations that popped up in Mississippi beginning in 2015 and 2016 and continue to the present day. Hattiesburg had their first in the fall of 2015, then Oxford, then Jackson in the fall of 2016.²³ Biloxi, Cleveland, Gulfport, Ocean Springs, and more followed close behind. Though the pandemic forced many to cancel or go online, communities across Mississippi have continued to organize Pride parades and other celebrations of LGBTQ+ identities since 2015, a marked contrast from earlier periods. Bigger parades might pull several hundred marchers and spectators, while smaller events like drag shows, movie nights, church events, and reading groups provide space for anyone looking to participate or learn more. In a state often depicted as actively hostile to queer people, these Pride events make queer southern

¹ Rucker, LaRecca, "Pride Parade Rolls on the Square," Oxford Eagle, May 8, 2016.

<https://www.oxfordeagle.com/2016/05/08/pride-parade-rolls-on-the-square/>

² The Spectrum Center: Hattiesburg Official Pride Weekend, <http://hattiesburgpride.com/prideweekend>

³ Associated Press, "Jackson' First LGBT Pride: 'It Was Much Love,'" Jackson Free Press, June 13, 2016.

<https://www.jacksonfreepress.com/news/2016/jun/13/jacksons-1st-lgbt-pride-parade-it-was-much-love/>

communities visible in new ways, while also revealing limitations understanding and organizing around queerness in the South.

For this MFA thesis project, I documented three Pride events in north Mississippi: Tupelo's first in fall 2018, Starkville's second in spring 2019, and Oxford's first after the onset of the pandemic, in the summer of 2021. I participated in many of these events; I volunteered at the first Oxford Pride parade in 2016 and marched in the subsequent parades with friends until 2019. I did not begin to think about documenting them or the community they represent until I took Dr. Jessie Wilkerson's Oral History class in the spring of 2018. That class focused on Mississippi's queer history, and the interviews we collected founded the Mississippi Queer Oral History archive, now housed at J.D. Williams Library's online repository, eGrove.⁴

I started the MFA program that fall and chose to make a short film about Tupelo's first Pride event for an independent study with John Rash that semester. During that process, I began to think about a longer project on Mississippi Pride parades, possibly a full-length documentary film, and decided to make this subject my final thesis project. I began work towards that goal in the spring of 2019 by making contacts and traveling to Starkville to film their second Pride parade and other events. Unfortunately, I had to put this work on hold for several years. I suffered a ruptured disc in my lower back in April of 2019, resulting in emergency surgery and several months of recovery. I also accepted a job offer that summer and moved to North Carolina in August of 2019, which was quickly followed by the onset of the pandemic, as well as the need for a second back surgery.

Once I began to recover from the second surgery, and when the vaccine became widely available, I had to reconsider how to finish this project. After many conversations with friends,

⁴ Queer Mississippi Oral History Project, <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/queerms/>

colleagues, and my very patient thesis committee, the project transformed into a multi-modal documentary website, which could combine the short film, other film clips, photography, and a written piece. I then traveled back to Oxford in June of 2021 for Out in the Grove, the sixth Pride in Oxford and the first on the campus of the University of Mississippi. While this thesis focuses on three towns in north Mississippi, Pride events are held across the state. Capital City Pride in Jackson is very active, the Gulf Coast Pride Association holds or sponsors events in many coastal cities, and many university towns have seen students and other campus members organize their own celebrations like Oxford and Starkville.⁵ Sadly, these are beyond the scope of this thesis, but these three events should be understood as part of a much larger story.

I documented the three parades and some of their surrounding events in Tupelo, Starkville, and Oxford by contacting event organizers, arranging introductory conversations and interviews, attending events with a camera to take film and photographs, and following up with organizers and other attendees. I chose these three Pride celebrations for several reasons; I began with Tupelo because it was happening when I started this project and continued with Starkville because it happened next, and those two cities were close enough for me to access. Once I revisited the project, I realized that Tupelo Pride could demonstrate what a first Pride event looked like in Mississippi, and Starkville could show the opposition that Pride organizers face and the labor and grit it takes to keep going. Documenting Oxford Pride in the summer of 2021 could show Pride amidst the pandemic, and shed a different light on why these events persist. Practically speaking, it was also easier for me to travel back during the summer, when school is not in session.

⁵ See, e.g., <https://mscapitalcitypride.org> and <https://www.gulfcoastweekend.com/2022/06/13/list-pride-month-events-across-south-mississippi/>

In addition to film and photography, I also wanted to use other primary and secondary sources to both document and understand these events. The Mississippi Queer Oral History Archive, available online, proved invaluable. It is a collection of oral histories and a few other documents related to queer history in Mississippi. Though it started with the oral history interviews that we collected in Jessie Wilkerson's spring 2019 class, the project continued with another class and several graduate student researchers/interviewers. Many of the people interviewed were a key part not only of organizing these Pride parades, but also of building queer community and institutions in north Mississippi for the past several decades.

I have been determined to create something with these materials because this wave of LGBTQ+ Pride events in Mississippi presents a counter to a number of negative stereotypes about queer life in the South: that it is inhospitable to LGBTQ+ people; if anyone who is queer does live there, they suffer under constant oppression; that anyone who identifies as queer leaves the state as soon as it is possible to do so; and that queer life and communities only exist in large urban areas, few if any in the South. National reporting on queer life in Mississippi echoes and reinforces these narratives; media outlets primarily run stories where queer life is under siege, often from fringe right-wing groups, and do not bother to report on successful LGBTQ+ events that proceed peacefully and without opposition.

When Starkville's city council denied the permit for the city's first ever Pride parade, national outlets like the New York Times ran stories calling out the council members' homophobia.⁶ Those outlets gave less coverage to the parade once the city council reversed its decision, and little if any to subsequent Pride parades. Local news is also susceptible to these narratives; when Tupelo held its first Pride event, the local television station ran a story that gave

⁶ Murphy, Heather, "How a Pastor and a Popcorn Shop Owner Helped Save Pride in Starkville," June 21, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/21/us/pride-starkville-mississippi.html>

nearly as much coverage to the two protesters who stood silently across the street as it did to the hundreds of people who gathered to celebrate Pride.⁷ Even stories that seek to complicate these narratives start with the assumption that LGBTQ+ individuals in the state are primarily oppressed and closeted.

Of course, there are many aspects of life in Mississippi that are inhospitable to queer individuals and communities. The state is one of the most political and socially conservative in the nation.⁸ There are no legal protections in the state for queer Mississippians unless they are provided by federal law, and some state laws explicitly allow for discrimination, like the Religious Liberty Accommodations Act (aka HB 1523).⁹ The state passed an anti-gay marriage constitutional amendment in 2004 with an 86 percent majority.¹⁰ There are no housing or employment nondiscrimination laws and no hate crime laws specifically protecting LGBTQ+ individuals.¹¹ The state did not issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples until forced to by *Obergefell v. Hodges*, a 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision.¹² The past few years have seen a vast increase in the number of anti-LGBTQ+ state legislation introduced; 2021 had a record 250 bills introduced at the state level and 2022 is currently on track to surpass that number.¹³ In 2022 alone, legislators in Mississippi have introduced bills that restrict healthcare for transgender youth, mandate single sex bathrooms by gender identity determined at birth, exclude transgender

⁷ Carreon, Cristina, “Tupelo Hosts Inaugural Pride Festival in Fairpark,” October 7, 2018. https://www.djournal.com/news/local/tupelo-hosts-inaugural-pride-festival-in-fairpark/article_e09f4fc3-d880-5e0b-aa6a-5640a3651dc7.html

⁸ Marszalek, III, John F. *Coming Out of the Magnolia Closet: Same-Sex Couples in Mississippi*. University of Mississippi Press, 2020. 4-5.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ ACLU, “Legislation Affecting LGBTQ Rights Across the Country,” <https://www.aclu.org/legislation-affecting-lgbtq-rights-across-country> (Updated weekly, last accessed August 2022).

youth from sports, restrict transgender people from acquiring identification that accurately reflects their gender, and more.¹⁴

Mississippi is nevertheless home to many queer individuals, who go to work and come home, who raise children and go to church, who enjoy drag shows and trips to bars in Memphis and New Orleans, who throw potluck and pool parties for their friends, who run for office and go to school and vacation on the coast, and who build joyful lives and supportive communities, even under these difficult circumstances. Documenting Pride parades and events in Mississippi helps us hold both of these truths at the same time: the state can be both an oppressive place for queer Mississippians and a space of joy. Focusing on these events foregrounds the strength and joy of the community without forgetting or erasing the violence or despair.

Pride parades and events let us see another thing missing from narratives about queer life in the South: joy. So many stories and stereotypes about LGBTQ+ people in the South and elsewhere assume an abject reality, misery, isolation, and oppression. Similarly, academic treatment of queer joy is understudied; multiple searches turn up a small handful of articles, usually focused on a narrower identity, like trans joy or queer Black joy.¹⁵ Those few articles examine interviews with and art made by queer people and argue that queer joy – whether trans or Black – is rooted in a better understanding of self, a connection to community and the ability to help others like you, and as a necessary part of resisting the oppressive structures that do still exist.¹⁶ Not only do Pride parades help us see southern queer community better, they also help build and sustain those communities by providing space for the emotional affect that underpins

¹⁴ Id.

¹⁵ See Shuster, Stef M. and Laurel Westbrook, “Reducing the Joy Deficit in Sociology: A Study of Transgender Joy.” *Social Problems*, 1-19, spac034, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spac034> June 2022, and Mitchell, R.P., “The Art of Ridicule: Queer Black Joy in the Face of the Fatigues,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 35, issue 2, 1-17, February 2022.

¹⁶ Id.

that work. Ignoring or downplaying joy affects the ability of queer Mississippians to continue doing this work and mischaracterizes queer life in the South. One parade inspired another, which inspired another, which inspired another, and all have been a part of increasing queer community building in Mississippi. It's hard to do that when the focus is only on oppression; giving people a party with their politics provides a much-needed way to express joy, and is also a way of imagining a better, more liberatory world.

This open celebration of identity and community meant a great deal to me personally. Somewhere in this process, I realized that if I kept going, I was going to have to come out. I already felt vaguely uncomfortable being read as a cisgendered white lady ally, and often wondered if people wondered about me. Did I need to be clearer about my relationship to the subject matter? And what would that look like, since my sense of self in relation to this project changed over time? I am asexual, which was something I had thought about for a long time, but only started to talk to my friends about during these years. I'm still not completely comfortable talking about it, though it's easier than it was then. When the Pride parades in Oxford first started, the most visible identities being celebrated were gay men, lesbians, and transgender and nonbinary people. Asexuality is often called "the invisible orientation," and I've found that to be true; I could spend the rest of my life telling people "I'm just not really dating anyone right now" and change the subject – a tactic I use often on my family.¹⁷ While it's under the nonheteronormative umbrella to be sure, ace and aro identities are still far less visible and understood than the L,G,B, and T. But over the years I started to feel like this was more for me, as I also got more comfortable with the idea myself. I came out to several of my friends from the oral history class during SEWSA, and that environment – where queerness was open and

¹⁷ Decker, Julia Sonder. *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality*. Skyhorse Press, 2015.

accepted and discussed positively in many directions – helped me get to that point. I’ve been really heartened to see more attention being paid to ace and aro identities in campus work; Glitterary, a queer literary festival organized by the Isom Center at the University of Mississippi, had a panel on asexuality in 2022.¹⁸ I was delighted to see it on the schedule and very sad that I didn’t get to be there to hear it in person.

My identity shapes many of the choices I made in this project. Among them are my choices in terminology. In this thesis, I use “queer” and “LGBTQ+” to refer to the broader community. In his groundbreaking book on queer southern history, *Men Like That*, John Howard defined queer as “all thoughts and expressions of sexuality and gender that are nonnormative and oppositional,” including those who define themselves as queer and those who do not.¹⁹ For me, the “Q+” and the broad sweep of “queer” are important, partly because that is the part that includes me, and also because those terms most easily encompass the full range of nonheteronormativity. I do occasionally use “gay man/men” or “lesbians” when I talk about specific individuals or narrower groups. But as this project focuses on the queer community more broadly in Mississippi, and as Pride events in Mississippi are generally meant to include the whole community, I chose “LGBTQ+” and “queer” to use most often.

Broad terms, however, should not eclipse the reality that not everyone experiences queer identities in the same way. While Pride parades and other Pride events make these lives more visible and demonstrate that there is more to queer life in the South than abjection, these events are not equally accessible to, and do not equally represent, all members of Mississippi’s queer communities. Because Mississippi is still a fraught place to be queer, and because LGBTQ+

¹⁸ See <https://glitteraryfestival.com/schedule>

¹⁹ Howard, John. *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*. University of Chicago Press, 1999. Xix.

people do not have specific protections for employment and housing, access to nondiscriminatory health care, and more, visibly presenting yourself as queer or participating in these events can be a racial, class, and gendered privilege. That does not mean a complete absence of people of color, of those who work in more precarious jobs, or of gender nonconforming people in these spaces, but it does mean that representations of Pride events in Mississippi are part of a larger context that makes embracing a public queer identity easier for some than others.

Academic works on LGBTQ+ history in the U.S. present similar problems; academic recognition and construction of queer identities has often relied on researching those with access to space and visibility. LGBTQ+ history and queer studies have often focused on the most visible signs of queer identity and community. Early gay and lesbian histories root their analysis of the appearance of queer identity in urban modernity and permanent, visible queer spaces – gay neighborhoods, gay bars and clubs, queer coffeeshops and bookstores, etc.²⁰ Other academic works trace political battles to fight oppression, like the legal fights to repeal sodomy laws, institute gay marriage, or engage with other discriminatory laws and actions.²¹ The small handful of academics here who have written about the South argue that this “metronormative” construction of queerness does not capture the full story of queer life in southern and/or rural spaces.²²

John Howard’s *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* argues that southern reality goes beyond metronormativity. Howard depicts queer life in the mid-twentieth century as an

²⁰ See, e.g., D’Emilio, John. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*. University of Chicago Press, 1983.

²¹ See, e.g., Duberman, Martin. *Stonewall*. Penguin Publishing Group, 1994.

²² Halberstam, J. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York University Press, 2005. 36.

open secret in Mississippi, that a code of silence and the advantages of kinship allowed for the quiet accommodation of queer Mississippians, who could be tolerated so long as they did not live openly or challenge power structures.²³ A few subsequent works have complicated and added nuance to Howard's thesis. Jaime Harker's *The Lesbian South* explores the radical, liberatory space of lesbian feminist literary magazines, women's presses, bookstores, and writing in the South in the 1970s and 1980s, demonstrating that a collective queer South has existed, and can be a space for challenging norms and stereotypes about both queerness and southernness.²⁴ E. Patrick Johnson's *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* and *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.: An Oral History* use oral histories to explore the complex lives of Black queer southerners and the ways in which race shapes the experience of sexuality.²⁵ Mary L. Gray's *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* brings explorations of queer southernness into the digital age, examining how teenagers navigate both online and material spaces to express and understand their identities.²⁶ Cecelia Parks' recent essay, "'Be Nice to My Shadow:' Queer Negotiation of Privacy and Visibility in Kentucky," outlines the complex strategies undertaken by queer people to give them control over visibility of their queerness in a region that is still not openly welcoming or tolerant.²⁷

Documenting Pride parades and other events in Mississippi bridges the divide between these approaches: parades are visible, open, public demonstrations celebrating LGBTQ+ identities that give a window into the networks and communities that are far less visible once the

²³ Howard, 142.

²⁴ Harker, Jaime. *The Lesbian South: Southern Feminists, the Women in Print Movement, and the Queer Literary Canon*. University of North Carolina Press, 2018.

²⁵ Johnson, E. Patrick. *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*. University of North Carolina Press, 2008, and *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.: An Oral History*. University of North Carolina Press, 2018.

²⁶ Gray, Mary L. *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility*, NYU Press, 2009.

²⁷ Parks, Cecelia. "'Be Nice to My Shadow:' Queer Negotiation of Privacy and Visibility in Kentucky." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 30 issue 3, 363-389.

parties are over. Queer Mississippians and their allies certainly exist, but they do not have access to permanent visible demonstrations of queerness like a neighborhood or gay bar, and they must often – depending on many considerations of class, race, gender, religion, and personal relationships – negotiate the visibility of their identities. While there are a small handful of examples of permanent spaces in Mississippi – the Spectrum Center in Hattiesburg, gay bars like Rumors that come and go, Violet Valley Bookstore – the list is short. Documenting Pride is a way to see not only that small number of permanent spaces – whose organizations often contribute to Pride celebrations in many ways – but also the less visible communities and work of organizing around queer life and identities.

Though the Pride parades and events increased the visibility of queer communities drastically in 2015 and 2016, there have been people and organizations providing space for queer community building long before 2015. One of the few works of popular media on the subject, *Small Town Gay Bar*, is a documentary film from 2006 that depicts two gay bars in rural Mississippi, one outside of Tupelo and one in Meridian.²⁸ *Small Town Gay Bar* makes those bars seem like tiny oases in the sea of conservative Mississippi, but according to oral histories from several members of the community in Tupelo, gay bars and gay friendly bars existed off and on in northeast Mississippi from at least the 1970s onward. Many of the participants in the organizing of events in Tupelo, Oxford, and Starkville, like PJ Newton, Rick Gladish, and Eric White, have been a part of putting on drag shows, queer dance nights, and more for several decades, and they are all represented in the Mississippi Queer Oral History archive.

Some of these events have been in more permanent LGBTQ+ spaces like Rumors, while others are in queer-friendly spaces like Rick's Café in Starkville or the Lamar Lounge and Proud

²⁸ Ingram, Malcom, dir. *Small Town Gay Bar*, View Askew Productions, 2006.

Larry's in Oxford. In Oxford, queer friendly and educational events about gender and sexuality, many hosted by the Isom Center, were a routine part of campus life long before the first Pride parade. Student groups like the Gay-Straight Alliance, UM Pride Network, MSU Spectrum, OUTlaw, OUTgrads, Queer People of Color, and more have existed on campuses, and both UM and Mississippi State run Safe Zone training programs to educate staff, faculty, and students about gender and sexuality. Oxford and Tupelo have PFLAG groups that have been running for over ten years, and the founders of both were all involved in Pride. Oxford also has Code Pink and OutOxford, community groups that put on events and programming in town. Some church spaces have been homes for queer folks and supporters, like the Unitarian church in Oxford. UU and St. Peter's Episcopal Church have both participated in Oxford's Pride parades; St. Peter's members who aren't marching in the parade often stand outside the church and offer free water bottles to everyone marching in the hot spring sun. Members of the UU congregation often march in the parade with a banner. Other churches like the University Baptist Church in Starkville also offer support, welcome, and events around Pride. And though there are not many non-profit spaces in north Mississippi, a few organizations like the Link Center in Tupelo and or the Powerhouse and Yoknapatawpha Arts Council in Oxford offer event space, meeting rooms, and other kinds of support. In all three cities, organizers drew on a deep well of community and experience in order to plan Pride. Though these spaces and events aren't as visible as a parade, paying attention to the complex organizing and the many participants in Pride opens up a much larger world of queer networks and communities.

The Pride events that I documented in Tupelo, Starkville, and Oxford all highlight different aspects of these experiences. All celebrate LGBTQ+ identities and reveal the depth and breadth of queer community across north Mississippi, but the material and historical conditions

shift with each city in ways that reveal different challenges. This written portion of the thesis is divided into three parts that will examine these different aspects. In Chapter 1, I begin with Tupelo, home of Elvis Presley and the American Family Association and the setting for part of *Small Town Gay Bar*. Tupelo demonstrates the need for different ways of seeing queer life in the South and in rural spaces; the Pride events there show that the community is far greater than what one might assume from an outside, metronormative perspective. Chapter 2 explores Starkville and the consequences of greater visibility; its parade received the most media coverage because the city council initially denied their permit, leading to national news coverage as well as a greater presence of counter-protesters. Starkville demonstrates the challenges of visibly expressing and celebrating queer identity in Mississippi. Finally, Chapter 3 looks at Out in the Grove in Oxford, the sixth Pride celebration in that city, the first on campus, and the first after the COVID vaccine. Oxford's party in the Grove made a space for queer joy in the ideological center of the University of Mississippi, building on several years' worth of organizing and community work. Like Fair Park in Tupelo, Main Street in Starkville, or previous parades through the Square in Oxford, holding Pride in the Grove demonstrates both the ephemeral nature of these events (the heteronormative world of tailgating resumed in the Grove in the fall, of course), the depth of the community, and the need for a celebration and demonstration of queer joy to sustain and fuel the fight against those oppressive structures that built the Grove, the campus, and the rest of the state.

CHAPTER TWO

TUPELO: A Different Kind of Visibility

Tupelo is a small city in north Mississippi with a population of about forty thousand people, with the population of the city plus the surrounding county hitting around 82,000.²⁹ Located on Highway 78 and Interstate 22, it was once a center of furniture manufacturing, but now its economy relies largely on health care, retail, and banking.³⁰ Tupelo is most famous as the birthplace of Elvis Presley, who was born in the eastern part of the city in 1935.³¹ A large Toyota plant is located about ten miles west in Blue Springs, Mississippi, and employs several thousand people.³² Tupelo is also known as the home of the American Family Association, a fundamentalist right-wing Christian non-profit that advocates on public policy, including opposing LGBTQ+ rights, abortion, and pornography.³³ The AFA owns over 200 right-wing

²⁹ U.S. Census Bureau. Tupelo, Mississippi: Quick facts. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/tupelocitymississippi> and Lee County: Quick facts. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/leecountymississippi.tupelocitymississippi/PST045221> Last accessed July 2022.

³⁰ Sparks, Evan. "Bank City, USA." *ABA Banking Journal*, Feb. 27, 2019. <https://bankingjournal.aba.com/2019/02/bank-city-usa-tupelo-mississippi/>

³¹ Guralnick, Peter. *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley*. Back Bay Books, 1995. 13.

³² Toyota Motor Manufacturing Mississippi, Inc. (TMMM) fact sheet. <https://pressroom.toyota.com/toyota-motor-manufacturing-mississippi-inc-tmmms-fact-sheet/>

³³ See generally, American Family Association website. <https://www.afa.net/>

radio stations across the U.S. and Canada, and is best known for coordinating boycotts and protests of American media.

If you'd asked me, say, ten years ago, I would have told you that Tupelo, Mississippi, was not a place I would expect to see a Pride parade. I wouldn't have said that about Oxford or Starkville, either, but at least in those towns, the university can provide a space for some queer community. My experience of universities, even very conservative ones like Vanderbilt and Mississippi, were that there was some space on campus for exploring and learning about queer identities and experiences. As an undergrad theater major in Nashville, I worked on costumes and lighting for many plays that explored queer identity, met the first out LGBTQ+ people I had known in my life, and at least heard about the gay bars and clubs over on Church Street, not too far from Vanderbilt's campus. I lived in McGill Hall for two years, also known as the "philosophy and fine arts dorm," which provided a safe(ish) space for many queer students, as did the theater department. I also took a class on Gender and Sexuality in the South, taught by Dr. Elizabeth Boyd, who did her MA in Southern Studies at UM and was my introduction to the program.

While in graduate school (the first time around) at the University of Mississippi, many of my Southern Studies classes dealt with gender and sexuality. We read Howard's *Men Like That* for at least one of them, and I saw John Howard give a talk on campus in the spring of 2006. I also once attended a protest in support of Judy Shepard when she came to campus to speak in the fall of 2005. Shepard is the mother of Matthew Shepard, a gay teenager murdered in Laramie, Wyoming; one of the plays that we produced at Vandy was *The Laramie Project*, a semi-documentary piece that depicts the town in the wake of his murder.³⁴ As in the play, Fred Phelps'

³⁴ Kaufman, Moises, and the Members of the Tectonic Theater Project. *The Laramie Project*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2001.

Westboro Baptist church targeted Laramie and the members of the Shepard family for years afterwards, and they had threatened to show up that day in Oxford to protest her talk. They didn't show, but it did start raining, so the couple dozen people who were there in support of Shepard wandered off. My friends and I hung out for a little while, then went to Ajax and got a beer.

Even in university towns that make room for education about, and exploration of, gender and sexuality, spaces and events were not permanent. The bars and clubs in Nashville opened and closed quickly. Student groups might persist, but activity levels wax and wane as the active members graduate and move on. And though Tupelo is home to several branch campuses for larger universities, I would not have thought of the city as having the same kinds of queer networks or communities that a larger college town might. Even the best-known depiction of queer life in/around Tupelo, the documentary film *Small Town Gay Bar*, shows that the bar was located outside of Tupelo in nearby Shannon, Mississippi, and takes some pains to show the isolation of the community. I would have expected queer life in Tupelo to be less visible than my experience of Oxford and other college towns.

Visibility is a key concern in LGBTQ+ history and queer studies and has real consequences for how we understand queer life in Mississippi. The South and rural spaces remain understudied in this literature, which often focuses on major American urban areas like New York and San Francisco.³⁵ Early histories root their analysis of the appearance of queer identity in urban modernity and look to institutions that cater exclusively to particular identities – like gay and lesbian bars and clubs, queer coffeeshops, gay bookstores, gay neighborhoods, etc.³⁶ Other academic works privilege national organizing efforts, like the legal fights to repeal sodomy

³⁵ Marszalek, 10.

³⁶ See. e.g., D'Emilio.

laws, fight for gay marriage, or engage with other types of discriminatory laws and actions.³⁷

These studies root their understanding of queer identity formation in urban modernity, what Halberstam termed “metronormativity.”³⁸ The academic work that does exist on the South argues for the necessity of using other methods to see queerness – not just explicitly “identity and culture formation...as tied to cities,” but the way that queer desire is possible at all times in all places, but shaped by the specificities of location.³⁹

John Howard’s groundbreaking *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* argues that queer life in the mid-twentieth century was an “open secret” in Mississippi, that a code of silence and the advantages of kinship allowed for queer Mississippians to be tolerated.⁴⁰ Howard also marks a difference between identity and action: “men like that” vs. “men who like that,” arguing that focusing only on those who openly identify as LGBTQ+ misses the larger terrain of queerness possible in Mississippi.⁴¹ Queer sex and queer people were accepted so long as they were not open about their queer identities or sex and did not challenge white supremacist power structures. Howard describes this “quiet accommodation” and documents the ways in which it sometimes gave way to more overt and active oppression, often as a backlash to the rise of other social movements like the Civil Rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 70s.⁴² While that culture of quiet accommodation still exists in Mississippi, and there are still those who do not openly identify as LGBTQ+ who nevertheless have queer desire or participate in same-sex

³⁷ See, e.g. Duberman.

³⁸ Halberstam, 36.

³⁹ Howard, 14.

⁴⁰ Id at 142.

⁴¹ Id at xviii.

⁴² Id at xv.

sex, queer identities have become more visible, and to a limited extent more accepted, in recent years.

In *Coming Out of the Magnolia Closet: Same-Sex Couples in Mississippi*, John F. Marszalek uses Howard's concept of quiet accommodation or "social compact of silence" to read and understand the oral histories he collected with gay and lesbian Mississippians in long term romantic relationships.⁴³ Marszalek found both similarities and differences from Howard's construction; "throughout the couples' stories a theme of tolerance but not acceptance is revealed; an unspoken admonition to live quietly, not act 'too gay,' and not demonstrate any displays of affection."⁴⁴ That social compact of silence partly describes how Tupelo's queer communities were able to exist.

Many oral histories gathered by University of Mississippi students track a small but significant LGBTQ+ community and set of spaces; Rick Gladish and PJ Newton describe a long history of gay bars in and around the city, several of which they worked at or owned.⁴⁵ Most served a small community across the region that drove long distances to come to the bars; Gladish notes that for Tupelo-area bars, "even though Columbus was an hour away, it was still technically competition."⁴⁶ Having more than one bar split the queer customer base of northeast Mississippi and made it even more difficult for them to operate, and they already weren't profitable enough to provide full employment for many. Both Gladish and Newton worked full time jobs while owning or running gay bars in the area.⁴⁷ Beyond the bars, Tupelo is also home

⁴³ Marszalek, 31.

⁴⁴ Id.

⁴⁵ Newton, P. J. and Schultz, David Hooper, "Newton, P. J." (2019). *Queer Mississippi (Complete Collection)*. 13. <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/queerms/13> and Gladish, Rick and Schultz, David Hooper, "Gladish, Rick" (2019). *Queer Mississippi (Complete Collection)*. 14. <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/queerms/14>

⁴⁶ Id.

⁴⁷ Id.

to spaces that are queer-friendly, if not specifically for queer people, like the Link Center that hosts PFLAG meetings or other bars and clubs that provide space for an occasional drag show.⁴⁸ Many of the bars that Gladish and Newton describe were out in the county, or in smaller towns near Tupelo or Columbus. Looking at the oral histories and the kinds of networks that Howard describes, these experiences and spaces are all mostly on the fringe or impermanent, tucked away in less visible spaces or the privacy of people's homes.

Mary Gray and Cecelia Parks' examinations of rural queer visibility also help describe how queer folks create space for themselves; though both Gray and Parks focus on Kentucky, parallels can easily be drawn to Mississippi. Cecelia Parks' recent essay, "'Be Nice to My Shadow': Queer Negotiation of Privacy and Visibility in Kentucky," examines the complex strategies undertaken by queer people to give them control over visibility of their queerness.⁴⁹ Not everyone is comfortable enough, or privileged enough, or safe enough, to be *seen* as queer, not just *known* as queer. Parks also notes that this negotiation of privacy and visibility renders the historical record incomplete; the interviewees in the oral histories she consults are out and visible enough to participate in a queer oral history archive.⁵⁰ Like Howard's consideration of "men who like that" as well as "men like that," those who are less visible nevertheless deserve attention. Because Mississippi is still a hostile space, many in those communities have to practice a negotiated visibility. Like Parks' queer Kentuckians, they "employed strategies that gave the control over the visibility of their queerness, such as only disclosing their queer identity to select people, participating in queer events in private spaces, moving away from their hometowns, and designing strategies for activism that allowed people to participate while maintaining their

⁴⁸ Deas, Melanie and Buckingham, Danielle, "Deas, Melanie" (2021). *Queer Mississippi (Complete Collection)*. 48. <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/queerms/48>

⁴⁹ Parks, 363-364.

⁵⁰ Id. at 369.

privacy.”⁵¹ Bars out in the county or occasional drag shows or community meetings in Tupelo give people a way to manage when they are seen as queer, letting them navigate that line with more private spaces where they could be more open about their identity.

Mary Gray considers similar tactics in queer youth in Kentucky, describing how queer teenagers do their own “queer identity work” by using what she calls “boundary publics.”⁵² She defines identity as “a highly social, contextual, and collective achievement rather than a psychological expression of an internal process of integration,” and focuses on “queer identity work as the collective labor of crafting, articulating, and pushing the boundaries of identity.”⁵³ Rural teenagers in our digital age take what they learn about queer identity online and adapt it to their own lives using what she terms “boundary publics:” “iterative, ephemeral experiences of belonging that circulate across the outskirts and through the center(s) of a more recognized and validated public sphere.”⁵⁴ Examples include GSA or PFLAG groups using public school space, queer-friendly events like punk rock shows, participating in social media and online communities, and doing drag in the Wal-Mart.⁵⁵ In rural spaces like Kentucky or Mississippi, in which permanent queer structures or institutions or spaces are few, ephemeral events make use of public space to do this collective identity work.

None of this work fully explains a full Pride celebration on “Tupelo’s front porch,” Fair Park, right in front of City Hall in the middle of downtown, attended by several hundred people draped in rainbows. For all that Tupelo and northeast Mississippi have a long history of gay bars, drag shows, and community groups, staking a claim to downtown Tupelo and loudly celebrating

⁵¹ Id. at 389.

⁵² Gray, 19-21.

⁵³ Id.

⁵⁴ Id. at 92-93.

⁵⁵ Id at 87-107.

LGBTQ+ people is highly visible in a way that breaks from the kind of queer identity work and space that was previously available. But aspects of Tupelo's Pride and similar events in other towns provide many ways for people to participate and to negotiate their visibility, queer or otherwise.

Obviously, Pride parades provide a highly visible space for people to support and express queerness, but they are also surrounded by related events that allow for participation without the same degree of visibility. The crowd at the drag shows later in the evening, for example, do not much resemble the crowd at Fair Park in the middle of the afternoon. Events in central locations often have more allies, more families, more children, and more elderly people. Events on campus, as might be expected, have more students and fewer town residents. Crowds at evening and late night events like the drag shows at the Link Center, which are often not publicized as much as the more central events, tend to be more visibly queer, have more obvious queer couples, and are more likely to be in their 20s-50s. Documenting Pride events allows for a window into a larger community, even if, like those missing from Parks' oral history collections or Howard's "men who like that," the entire landscape of queer desire is not immediately represented.

Pride events allow participants in those boundary publics a negotiated visibility: the parades and events use public, visible, highly centralized space to loudly proclaim and celebrate queer identity in large groups, but they also provide cover by including many straight allies, by organizing partly through online spaces like list serves, websites, and social media, and by offering multiple events, many of which are less public and central but nevertheless provide an opportunity to do the collective labor of queer identity work. The ephemerality of these events – they might take up a week or long weekend once or twice a year – demonstrates the presence,

acceptance, and support of and for queer Mississippians where permanent and permanently visible structures are lacking, and stakes a claim for LGBTQ+ folks and their supporters at the center of some of Mississippi's most public and iconic spaces: main street in Starkville, in front of town hall in Tupelo, and on the square and in the Grove in Oxford. Pride parades are both shaped by material conditions – lack of resources and critical mass of concentrated urban population for permanent and visible queerness – and also shape the material circumstances for their own gain – we might not have a gay neighborhood or a lesbian bar, but we can have a party in the Grove. We can drape a Pride flag on the Elvis statue for an afternoon. We can wrap rainbows around a cowbell and ring it as loudly as possible, for the span of a parade.

PROCESS:

I was not necessarily thinking in terms of negotiated visibility or boundary publics when I decided to film Tupelo's first Pride event in the fall of 2018. Though I had been to a number of Oxford Pride Parades at that point, Tupelo was where I first started to get a sense of the shape of Pride events in Mississippi. The previous spring, I had taken Dr. Jessie Wilkerson's "Introduction to Oral History: Documenting LGBTQ Histories in Mississippi, which deeply informed my approach to this project. We read *Men Like That*, of course, and *Out in the Country*. We also read a number of essays from *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* and several essays about documenting queer life at southern universities. Dr. Wilkerson also chose to invite members of the queer communities in Oxford to speak to the class about their experiences.

Gail Stratton and Eunice Benton, founders of the local PFLAG organization (only one example of the tremendous community building work they have done over the years in Oxford)

came to talk about their connections to the topic. Stratton and her wife Pat Miller have been out in Oxford for several decades and raised a son there together.⁵⁶ Benton's son came out to his Southern Baptist family as a teenager in the 1980s, and she spoke about founding PFLAG to help other families navigate similar situations. Jaime Harker came to our class to talk about her (then unpublished) book, *The Lesbian South*, as well as her work on campus as an English professor and director of the Isom Center for Women's and Gender Studies. Jaime Cantrell, then a visiting professor of English and LGBTQ Program Coordinator for the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement, spoke about a collection of essays she edited, *Out of the Closet, Into the Archives: Researching Sexual Histories*, as well as her work on campus. Malik Pridgeon, then the president of the Queer People of Color student group, talked about founding that group and the work they were doing on campus (I was absent that day and very sad to have missed it.) Dr. Wilkerson also brought in Josh Burford and Maigen Sullivan of the Invisible Histories Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to archiving and preserving queer southern culture.

It wasn't just the guest speakers who had connections to queer life in Oxford and on campus; I and several of my classmates did as well. Frankie Barrett, Sarah Heying, and Hooper Schultz were all on the student board of OutGrads, the recently founded LGBTQ+ graduate student group. Mary Knight was working on her project about Hubert Creekmore, a gay novelist and editor from Water Valley, Mississippi. And somewhere in the middle of the semester, I realized that I knew most of the guest speakers and much of the Oxford queer history, mostly because I'd been on the periphery of it in graduate school. I knew Gail Stratton and Eunice Benton from the Wise Women lunch group and Indivisible, a local progressive group. I'd known Jaime Harker for a long time, having taken classes from her from my first round in graduate

⁵⁶ Stratton, Gail and Heying, Sarah, "Stratton, Gail" (2018). *Queer Mississippi (Complete Collection)*. 19. <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/queerms/19>

school. I'd met Jaime Cantrell through mutual friends, and eventually I did tell everyone that I had taken a couple of classes from John Howard when I was in graduate school at King's College London. When I lived in Oxford from 2004-2006 and 2007-2009, I had also hung out with several friends (including one of my best friends, Pip Gordon, who I interviewed for the class) at queer-friendly bars like Jubilee and went to events like John Howard's 2006 talk on campus and the Judy Shepard protest. I also tried to go to OUTlaw events at the law school to support my students, so I was also familiar with that side of campus organizing. The controversy over Starkville's first Pride parade happened during that semester, and our class followed it closely. The city council initially denied their parade permit, then approved it after national media coverage and a lawsuit. Several of my classmates traveled to Starkville to march in that first Pride. So even as we were documenting queer communities in north Mississippi, we were also creating our own.

Many of the guest speakers wound up being interviewed by my classmates; main project for the class was one oral history life interview, and we all had to interview someone with a connection to queer life in north Mississippi. Those oral histories became the foundation of the Queer Mississippi Oral History Project, a digital archive developed in conjunction with the J.D. Williams Library's Archives and Special Collections and the Invisible Histories Project. Our class also took those oral histories and edited them into a documentary performance. We each took on the voice of the person we'd interviewed, and edited pieces of their oral histories together, mostly by theme, into a performance piece. We read it aloud to a crowd of a few dozen at Burns Belfry on April 25, 2018, with many of the interviewees in attendance. It was a very moving experience for all of us; several people cried. I remember several people saying that it was very overwhelming to see a collective presentation of queer experiences in Mississippi,

because for so many people, the experience of realizing that you are gay or lesbian is a very isolating one. That event made everyone feel less alone.

So when I began the MFA program in the fall of 2018, I was already very interested in, and connected to, queer communities in Mississippi. I don't remember how I found out about Tupelo's first Pride event – probably Facebook, where we did so much of our organizing and advertising events at the time. I initially wanted to make a short film that semester, though I didn't know what about, because I wanted to practice my photography and editing skills. I signed up to take an independent study with John Rash with the idea that my semester project would be a short film. When I found out about Tupelo, I thought that it would make a great subject, and I was excited to build on what we'd started in Dr. Wilkerson's class. I also approached the project from the perspective of someone familiar with Oxford's queer scenes, and having had the experience of documenting a range of queer life in Mississippi.

I also don't remember who I reached out to first, but I found Melanie Deas and Amanda Daniels because they were two of the main organizers, and had been involved with PFLAG and the local "Give Hate a Holiday" event. They connected me with Eric White, also known as GoDiva Holliday, who had been doing drag in Tupelo off and on for years, and was very involved in both the Pride event and the queer community in general. My final interview was with Benson Hill, who had actually been one of my students; he took the legal research class I taught at the law school. I drove over to Tupelo to interview Amanda before the event, but everyone else I interviewed afterwards. Even some of the interviews were in places connected to queer or queer-friendly spaces in Tupelo; I interviewed Eric and Melanie at the Link Center, and Amanda in her law office where she often represents LGBTQ+ clients.

The Pride event itself was a lot of fun. I drove over to Tupelo fairly early on October 6th and parked just off the southeast corner of Fair Park. I carried the camera and a tripod around with me, but I wanted the car to be close in case I needed batteries or any other equipment. It was a beautiful day, very sunny and hot for October, even that early in the month. Fair Park is just in front of Town Hall in downtown Tupelo, and is sometimes referred to as “Tupelo’s front porch.” It’s a flat piece of ground about a half of a block big, with a small playground on the eastern side, and, most notably, a life-sized statue of Elvis singing into a microphone. There aren’t many trees, mostly a few crepe myrtle, so I (and eventually other attendees) were grateful for the handful of tents that volunteers set up and the free water bottles handed out by the organizers. Organizers had set up a small stage in the road in front of Town Hall, and it was flanked by sound equipment. Opposite Town Hall on the north side of the park, there is a small archway delineating the entrance to the park, even though the rest of the space is open.

I think I said hey to Amanda, probably met a couple of other people who were there early. From then on I basically just ran around filming as much as I could. A number of friends - and fellow classmates - were there as well. Jonathan Smith had very graciously volunteered to film as well to help me out, and Mary Knight also filmed and took photographs. Hooper Schultz, Frankie Barrett, and Sarah Heying were there tabling with a few other folks from OutGrads and the UM Pride Network.

The event as a whole was pretty straightforward: the first hour or so was just people gathering, hanging out, chatting, and checking out the few tables and tents. The official portion of the started with a few speeches – some of the organizers said a few words, including Eric White and Melanie Deas. Benson Hill gave a speech which is also included in the eGrove

collection (when I interviewed him later, he gave me a copy, and gave me permission to give it to the archive.) I tried to film as much of this as possible, and Jonathan filmed most as well.

After the speeches came the walk. The organizers planned a walk instead of a parade, partly because they did not want to shut the streets in Tupelo. In the interview I did for the film, White also spoke about wanting a walk instead of a march, because march sounded too militant. When Eric was done speaking (and giving directions), I ran out under the archway and set up beside the sidewalk to film people walking out of the archway and turning right to walk along East Main Street. The path was about four blocks long (the blocks are not consistently laid out in that part of town), down to Gateway Park, where everyone looped around the path in that park and came back along East Main again. Overall, it was a little less than a mile, maybe $\frac{3}{4}$ of one.

After the walk came the daytime drag show. Eric has been doing drag for several decades in Mississippi and elsewhere, which he spoke about in his interview. He first learned at the (in)famous gay bar, Rumors, that used to be outside of Tupelo in Shannon, Mississippi, and was the subject of the 2006 documentary, *Small Town Gay Bar*. Over the course of working on this project, I realized that several of the people from that film were still in Tupelo, still a part of these communities, and helped with different aspects of these events. Rick Gladish, who owned Rumors, helped with the sound system that day, and was at many of the drag shows and Pride events that I saw over those few months.

A handful of drag queens performed, some onstage, some interacting more closely with the audience. Their makeup and outfits shone in the sunlight, and though it was very hot that afternoon, everyone still had a great time dancing along with the queens. Jonathan and I filmed as much as we could, and after a few of those performances, I was done for the day. The crowd had started to disperse and the tables and tents started to come down by mid-afternoon. I felt like

I had gotten enough of what I needed, and I was also exhausted from running around in the heat. I remember it being a lot of fun though. It was terrific to see so many people – at least a few hundred – dressed up in rainbows having a great time dancing to drag queens and walking together in the middle of downtown Tupelo, claiming a space for themselves in a town not known for its tolerance of queer life.

There were other events that weekend, and the organizers said I was welcome if I wanted to come, but at the time I was focused on the main event, the thing that seemed most like a parade. There was another drag show later, with a cash bar (and inside, in the air conditioning). I was also pretty exhausted by the time the main event was over, and headed back to Oxford shortly after. Later I got in touch with Melanie, Eric, and Benson, interviewed them, and started to put the film together.

I had plenty of concerns throughout the project that I tried to manage as best I could, while also being constrained by time and labor considerations. I wanted to get a range of voices for the film, and Melanie and Amanda made sure to put me in touch with actual queer people, as they were both straight allies. Fortunately, Eric and Benson were happy to talk to me. I did only interview white people for the film; they were the primary organizers, though there were Black people both in attendance and performing. If circumstances had been different for this larger project, I would have liked to go back and interview a wider and more diverse range of people about Pride more generally. Given the constraints of the semester and a five-minute short documentary, I felt okay about having the three main organizers and one of the speakers. I was also a little worried about interviewing Benson, who had been one of my students, and who was still a law student at the time. He wasn't in my class in fall 2018, though, and he didn't seem to have a problem with it. I might have been more cautious had the subject matter been different.

For this project, I wasn't really interested in criticizing what they were doing in Tupelo; I just wanted to tell the story and support the work they were doing to build community and celebrate queer folks. Every documentary relationship is a fraught one, but I tried to communicate that I was a fan of what they were doing and wanted to support it and make sure it was documented.

Between Jessie's oral history class and my work in Tupelo, 2018 was when I started to get a sense of how queer community in Mississippi worked in the present day, informed by the historical and sociological work of Howard and Gray and other academics. I began to see how these events made use of public space, how they planned multiple events over the course of several days, and how Pride events in Mississippi were a chance to see a community that usually wasn't so visible. As Benson said in his interview,

“the governor of Mississippi has said that there are no trans people in Mississippi, and while we know that's ridiculous, we've got to fight that [when people claim] there are no gay people in Mississippi, or they're only a small percentage, or they're not really here. We are here, we're a large group, and we do care about each other and we do care about Mississippi.”⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Interview with author, October 2018.

CHAPTER THREE

STARKVILLE: The Consequences of Visibility

By the end of the 2018 fall semester, I had decided that my thesis project for the MFA would be about Pride in Mississippi. I felt good about the short film on Tupelo's first Pride event, and Oxford's spring 2019 Pride parade would be its fourth annual. Starkville was planning its second after its tumultuous first year. Other cities and towns in Mississippi were following as well – Jackson, Hattiesburg, Biloxi, Cleveland, Ocean Springs, and more had already held Pride parades and events and were planning more. I initially thought of collecting more interviews for a community documentary theater piece or making a full-length documentary film. I set out to film Starkville and Oxford in the spring of 2019 to work towards that goal. I already knew Oxford well and had plenty of contacts there, so my next step was Starkville.

Unlike Oxford and Tupelo's first Pride events, Starkville's did not proceed without major controversy. At worst, Oxford usually had a couple of counter-protesters who would show up with handwritten cardboard signs and stand by the Confederate statue on the south side of the courthouse. Tupelo's first Pride event had a couple of kids stand across the street with a similar sign. At one point during the very hot and sunny day, a volunteer ran across the street to offer him a bottle of water, and he refused to take the "gay water," and that was the worst thing that happened and the only encounter anyone had with him all day. At the first Pride parade in

Oxford, I remember Jennifer Stollman, then one of the directors of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation, instructing the crowd on what to do if any counter protesters showed up. Don't engage with them, she said, leave crowd control to the police, and focus on celebrating ourselves and showing love for the LGBTQ+ community. She urged us not to give attention to the voices of hate.

That doesn't mean that communities weren't prepared; Melanie Deas, one of the Tupelo organizers, worked with the police department on the security, and they "had the entire SWAT team surrounding Fair Park waiting for something horrible to happen."⁵⁸ Fortunately, nothing did. Oxford organizers have also coordinated with the city and campus police; parade permits run through the city police department, and the police are present for events for traffic control and other security issues. Neither city has experienced much in the way of public problems, regardless of whatever might be happening behind the scenes.

Unfortunately, Starkville had a very different experience. It's difficult to say exactly why: is it because the process for acquiring a parade permit relies on a vote by the Board of Alderman, rather than an approval process by the police department in Oxford or the Convention and Visitors Bureau in Tupelo? Was it a matter of different personalities, or a slightly more politicized process? Starkville's queer history and communities aren't that much different from Tupelo or Oxford; similar access to queer or queer-friendly bars, relatively similar college town atmosphere. Mississippi State University is generally understood to be more of a blue-collar, agricultural school, as compared to the relatively more white-collar, privileged University of Mississippi, but would that make a difference, and if so, how? Student activists at State had been working to build the school's LGBTQ+ organizations for several years and had been very

⁵⁸ Deas, Melanie and Buckingham, Danielle, "Deas, Melanie" (2021). *Queer Mississippi (Complete Collection)*. 48. <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/queerms/48>

successful.⁵⁹ Starkville’s economy and general culture differs slightly; Columbus Air Force base brings a large military presence to the area that is absent in Oxford or Tupelo. None of these facts or stereotypes necessarily mean that Starkville would approach an LGBTQ+ Pride parade any differently than Oxford or Tupelo.

My best guess is that the approval process does matter. All three cities have roughly the same governmental structure; each has a mayor and city council or board of aldermen. Cities in Mississippi (and the rest of the U.S.) each have their own code of ordinances, which sets up the governmental structure for the town and provides local rules, which are voted on by the council/aldermen.⁶⁰ Most legal issues are governed by state or federal law, but cities do have the power to decide some local issues: zoning, alcohol laws, local taxes, police and fire departments, emergency management, etc.⁶¹ This also includes managing local public space for events. Each city has adopted different procedures for approving parades or other special events using public space.⁶² Local ordinances are still subject to state and federal law, and if there is a conflict between them, state or federal law will trump local laws. But local ordinances are passed and the procedures they dictate are managed on the local level.

In Oxford, the police department provides a [form](#) that is approved by the chief of police.⁶³ It requests a contact person, details about the date, time, and location, number of people expected, and route information. I applied for several of these while working with the local

⁵⁹ Campbell, Larrison. “Starkville Pride Marches into Court Over Parade Permit,” *Mississippi Today*, Feb. 26, 2018. <https://mississippitoday.org/2018/02/26/starkville-pride-marches-court-parade-permit/>

⁶⁰ Gilliland, Kristy L. *Mississippi Legal Research*. Carolina Academic Press, 2014. 147-153.

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² Oxford, MS., Code Article XX. Parades, Public Assemblies, and Special Events; Tupelo, MS., Code Article V: Parades, Processions, and Public Demonstrations; Starkville, MS., Code Sec. 12.4 Assemblies, Parades, and Processions.

⁶³ Oxford Police Department, Special Event, Parade, or Public Assembly Permit, <https://oxfordms.net/documents/departments/police/special-event-permit.pdf> last accessed August 2022.

Indivisible group, and the process was relatively simple. Oxford police were a little wary in those years, largely because the post-Trump election women's march in January of 2017 requested the square sidewalks and estimated 150 participants, and at least triple that number showed up.⁶⁴ The police had to shut down the square at the last minute to allow protesters to march in the streets, as we definitely could not all fit on the sidewalk. I did experience the whims of bureaucracy a couple of times; applicants are currently required to submit the form at least 30 days ahead of time, but that doesn't guarantee that the police department will let you know they've approved your permit unless you call them back. Repeatedly. There are other ways to discourage public gatherings that don't involve outright denying a permit.

In Tupelo, special events [permits](#) run through the Convention and Visitors Bureau, which is under the mayor's office.⁶⁵ Melanie Deas first raised the issue with Jason Shelton, the mayor at the time. She was actually talking to him about working with the ACLU to get a non-discrimination ordinance passed in the city, and according to her, "threw out a comment because it was shortly after the Starkville Pride incident...and I said, so what you're saying is if I showed up at your office to apply for a permit for a pride in Tupelo, it would be fine? And he said, sure."⁶⁶ She noted that the idea had been discussed for years, but that it took that conversation and actually applying for the permit to make it happen. Deas got PFLAG and other groups involved, and they didn't have any trouble getting the permit.

In Starkville, the process runs through the Board of Aldermen. As in most other cities in Mississippi, they are directly elected from separate districts or wards in the city. This means that

⁶⁴ Staff Report, "Women's March: Oxford Residents March for America Day After Trump Inauguration," *Oxford Eagle*, Jan. 21, 2017. <https://www.oxfordeagle.com/2017/01/21/oxonians-march-for-their-rights/>

⁶⁵ City of Tupelo website, Special Events Permits. <https://www.tupelo.net/specialeventspermits/>

⁶⁶ Deas, Melanie and Buckingham, Danielle, "Deas, Melanie" (2021). *Queer Mississippi (Complete Collection)*. 48. <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/queerms/48>

Starkville is the one town where directly elected representatives, rather than officials at a city agency, were directly voting on a [Pride parade permit](#).⁶⁷ When the local organization Starkville Pride, then led by president Bailey McDaniel, applied for a parade permit with the city, the aldermen initially voted no, 4-3. According to a motion filed in the subsequent lawsuit, the city had received 88 permit applications from 2010 to 2018, and had approved every single one of them.⁶⁸ This was a devastating blow for the organizers and for Starkville and Mississippi State's queer community. It also immediately became a legal problem for the city of Starkville.⁶⁹

Some articles about the event speculate that the aldermen were particularly sensitive to the issue because of the controversy over a non-discrimination ordinance in 2014; the board voted to approve the ordinance but was pressured into repealing it several months later by local religious groups.⁷⁰ On the other hand, Starkville's mayor, Lynn Spruill, voiced support for the parade, and claimed in an interview with the New York Times to be "a perfectly happy single woman" who had "had good relationships in her life with men and women and never felt the need to identify as anything in particular."⁷¹ It seemed like everyone in Starkville was negotiating visibility in the wake of these public events. The aldermen had already experienced the increased visibility and pressure that comes with directly legislating on LGBTQ+ issues, and in the usual fashion, became part of the problem, while the mayor chose a different stance.

⁶⁷ City of Starkville, Special Events Permit Applications, <https://www.tupelo.net/specialeventspermits/> The linked version is from 2020, so the 2018 version would probably have looked different.

⁶⁸ Memorandum of Law in Support of Plaintiffs' Motion for a Preliminary Injunction, Feb. 26, 2018. 6. <https://manage.kaplanhecker.com/sites/default/files/02.26.18%20Starkville%20Pride%20Memo%20of%20Law%20ISO%20Mot%20for%20PI%20%28corrected%2C%20as%20filed%29.pdf>

⁶⁹ Holloway, Alex. "Starkville Pride Sues City of Starkville," *The Dispatch*, Feb. 27, 2018. <https://cdispatch.com/news/2018-02-27/starkville-pride-sues-city-of-starkville/>

⁷⁰ Campbell, Larrison. "Starkville Pride Marches into Court Over Parade Permit," *Mississippi Today*, Feb. 26, 2018. <https://mississippitoday.org/2018/02/26/starkville-pride-marches-court-parade-permit/>

⁷¹ Murphy, Heather. "How a Pastor and a Popcorn Shop Owner Helped Save Pride in Starkville," *New York Times*, June 21, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/21/us/pride-starkville-mississippi.html> There are widespread rumors that Spruill is queer, though she has not confirmed this.

Visibility is a key issue in LGBTQ+ studies generally, and in this project specifically. Visibility is often offered as a solution for the social, political, and cultural problems facing the LGBTQ+ community, certainly as a route to self-knowledge but also as a way to address many other issues. The popularity of Pride events is partly based on this; it is literally about celebrating queer identities openly, and arguments about Pride and the reasons that these events persist often come with political connections. But being visibly queer, not just known as queer but also seen as queer, is more accessible for some members of the community than others. Other axes of privilege still hold; being white, cis-gendered, having a stable job and/or housing, inheriting family wealth, having access to decent health care, etc., all affect how “out” and visible people are able to be. The editors of *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* point out that while visibility is offered to trans people as a cure for everything from “poverty to murder to police violence,” under our current political system, it “ultimately gives little support or protection to many, if not most, trans and gender nonconforming people, particularly those who are low-income and/or of color – the very people whose lives and labor constitute the ground for the figuration of this moment of visibility.”⁷² The growing social awareness of the existence of trans people (or at least to the fact that being transgender is not a mental illness but just another way to be a person that deserves the same rights and privileges and ability to have a “livable life” that cisgendered people enjoy) has been met with a broad backlash of conservative politicians trying to enact bills targeted as trans folks.

Work on trans identities, particularly trans women of color, pays careful attention to the problem of visibility. In their article “(Trans)Gendering Abolition: Black Trans Geographies,

⁷² Gossett, Reina, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds. *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. MIT Press, 2017. Xv-xvi.

Art, and the Problem of Visibility,” Jaden Janak notes that “visibility, at least in the traditional sense, is a fraught project for trans people, whose moment of coming into visibility is often the moment of violence.”⁷³ For Black trans women in particular, “this visibility comes at a cost...[their] proximity to the criminal (in)justice system places them in the crosshairs of the state’s criminalizing apparatus.” Furthermore, media visibility of trans people can render them both hypervisible and hyperinvisible at the same time by reducing them to stereotypes and statistics.⁷⁴ On the one hand, it’s a key way for LGBTQ+ people to gain self-knowledge – these communities don’t exist without people being able to identify themselves and each other in some way – but on the other, visibility opens up people to violent or oppressive responses. And those responses fall most heavily on the most marginalized people, which is why work about and by trans women of color focuses so heavily on it.

This work helps us understand what happened in Starkville. At the moment when the LGBTQ+ community became most visible to a governing structure – elected officials whose activities are subject to public scrutiny rather than agencies whose work is less visible – is the moment where backlash becomes a response. In this particular case, the defense to that response was a legal one. The problem for the Board of Aldermen and the city of Starkville is that local ordinances and their procedures are still subject to state and federal law, in this case, the First Amendment. Parade permits are a free speech issue.

Freedom of speech in the U.S. isn’t absolute; the government has the power to regulate speech, but those powers have been defined by the federal courts. Some speech is more protected than others; commercial speech is the least protected because the government has an interest in

⁷³ Janak, Jaden. “(Trans)Gendering Abolition: Black Trans Geographies, Art, and the Problem of Visibility,” *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 28:2, (2022). 259.

⁷⁴ *Id.*

protecting people from, for example, false advertising. Political speech, however, is the most protected. It can be regulated by time, place, and manner, but it cannot be regulated by content. In this case, the Board of Aldermen – government officials – were suppressing the free speech of the parade organizers on the basis of content, i.e., the fact that it was a Pride parade. The fact that they had approved every other recent permit application, and that they had not asked any questions or shown any evidence that this was anything other than discrimination against a protected class, made the case evident.

The denial of the permit, the subsequent outcry, and the lawsuit combined to draw national attention. Newspapers like the New York Times and the Washington Post ran stories, as did the regional and local newspapers. As Janak points out, this coverage rendered queer people in Mississippi both hypervisible and hyperinvisible; national attention was briefly focused on Starkville, but the coverage largely fell into tired tropes about oppressed, isolated LGBTQ+ people in a hostile world. Some coverage was given to allies and others in support networks, but it was largely individualized and did not represent the larger social divides. None of it understood the longer history of queer life in the state or the region. Once the board of aldermen reversed their decision, the attention dried up. Few if any were still paying attention the next year. Which is one of the reasons that I wanted to tackle this project; local communities deserved better representation. If Pride is about visibility, even in the face of backlash, then at last we should be visible as full people and full communities, not a stereotype made up to fuel someone else's agenda.

PROCESS:

When I became interested in documenting Starkville in early 2019, the community there was planning their second Pride parade, again with a certain spirit of defiance. The board of aldermen had approved the permit for March 24, 2019 without issue and plans were underway to hold another parade as well as related activities, including a drag show at Rick's Café, an outdoor art market, several on-campus events like movie screenings, a church sponsored event on Sunday morning, and more. Because I was thinking about a longer thesis project, I wanted to spend more time in Starkville, talk to and interview more people, and get a broader sense of what was going on. I also knew the least about that town. I'd only been to the city a couple of times before starting this project, so I knew I would need to spend more time getting up to speed. There were some connections between Oxford and Starkville, but there were more between Tupelo and Starkville. It's about two hours from Oxford to the Starkville area, but only about forty-five minutes from Tupelo. And, of course, the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State are rivals. The distance made the documentary work more difficult, as did balancing it with a full-time job and an increasing chronic pain problem. It was hard for me to drive down and back in one day, so I stayed overnight a couple of times, and hotel and AirBnb charges added up.

I gained a few contacts and arranged to meet several over a weekend. I first talked to Patty Lantham, a faculty member at State who had helped with handling the previous years' parade. The media focused on Bailey McDaniel, the student president of the undergrad LGBTQ+ group on campus, as well as their Public Relations director, Emily Turner, but events like this require a village to put on, not just one or two people, especially during a political firestorm. I was interested in talking to anyone who was involved at all, which was probably going to be a lot of people. I met Patty at a coffee shop on Main Street and chatted with her for about an hour. I

didn't record this conversation; I wanted to introduce myself and the project and get a sense for what was going on, establish contacts, and try to present myself as someone who was not prejudiced or here to take advantage of anyone or so on. I was trying to become known, basically. I thought that getting familiar with folks first would help set up interviews later, and I thought I had lots of time.

I met several of the students that were involved that year at SEWSA, the Southeastern Women's Studies Association's annual conference, which was held at the University of Mississippi that year. The Isom Center organized it (of course), and I think it was a triumph for Jaime Harker, Kevin Cozart, Teresa Starkey, and everyone else involved. It definitely continued my sense that we were all actively building community as we were also documenting it; our oral history class presented our documentary performance piece again. I showed my short film about Tupelo Pride. Josh Burford and Maigen Sullivan from the Invisible Histories Project came back to give a talk about their project. Many of the Oxford community members were there for various talks and panels, and many of us got to meet speakers like Minnie Bruce Pratt. Pratt gave the first land acknowledgement I ever heard, and also mentioned the work that our newly founded labor union chapter was doing on campus. Jessie Wilkerson and I made very excited faces at each other in the audience. Some of the attendees had traveled up from Starkville, and they included several undergrads who were organizing that year's parade. I got to meet them, and though it was a little awkward, they seemed interested in the project and were open to talking to me.

I felt good about how the project was shaping up when I headed to Starkville to film the actual parade. Several people from Oxford would be there, I knew Patty Lantham, I had met some of the undergrads, Eric White was part of the parade and the drag show later that night.

Jonathan Smith, who had been in the oral history class and was also working on the MFA, also came down to film, so I knew I'd have more footage beyond what I shot. I got there the evening before and woke up early at my Airbnb to head over to the craft market.

The craft market was located in a tiny park on Lampkin Street, but it managed to pack a lot into a small space. It was early enough in the spring that the morning was still chilly and the trees were still bare, but the redbuds in the park had blossoms clinging to their branches. A local coffee shop sold rainbow-colored pastries and black coffee. Several tents offered handmade crafts like tie-dyed rainbow t-shirts and crocheted pins that had messages like "I'm here, I'm queer" and "Starkville is for Lovers." The Starkville Pride organization's tent had t-shirts and carabiners for sale. Drag queens wandered through the market, posing with others in the crowd for photos and selfies. P.J. Newton had a table advertising O'Hara's Productions and the drag show later that evening. A Small Mercies Animal Shelter had a few dogs for adoption and t-shirts for sale that read "ACT PUP: Pups Unleashing Pride." Others had dogs on leashes, and they had dressed their dogs in rainbow banadas or rainbow tutu skirts. Bert Montgomery was there with a tent representing the local University Baptist Church and selling copies of some of his books. A lady wandered around holding a sign that read, "Free Mom Hugs" and was hugging anyone who wanted one. The Golden Triangle chapter of Indivisible, a national progressive organization, had a tent, and I remember stopping by to chat about Oxford's local chapter. Someone had brought sidewalk chalk, and people had scrawled messages ranging from "Jesus Loves All of Us" to "God Loves Fags." Pride flags were everywhere; many people were wearing or flying or waving the basic rainbow flag, but several people or tents flew trans flags, with their pastel pink, blue, and white stripes, as well. Many people also displayed the Human Rights Campaign's Equality flag, a blue field with a yellow equal sign. One of the craft tents even had a

little display of fresh flowers in pots, and the flowers had been arranged in a rainbow, from purple and blue on one end to orange and red on the other.

I wandered around and introduced myself to many people. I did my best to foreground the project; I explained what I was doing and made sure to ask people if they were ok with being on camera. Even before constructing the academic side to this thesis project, I was well aware that not everyone in these crowds wanted to be visible in the same ways. Some are out and proud, no matter what, whereas others were there to support their friends and not comfortable on camera, and others were clearly out to some groups – probably friends – but not others who might later see a film or photographs – like family or church groups. Most were happy to talk to me, but a couple said they'd rather not be filmed, and I just thanked them and moved on.

Consent in this environment is tricky; it is a public event and many people are filming or taking photographs with their cell phones. But it is still an LGBTQ+ event, and many of the attendees were clearly young, probably college students. I wanted to document the event but I did want to offer a choice to the people about whether I would film them or not.

The national media attention the year before had drawn a bigger response from the right; a particular church group had marched more or less alongside the parade in 2018, shouting about sin with a bullhorn. Several people held large signs, many several feet across and wide, that read “Sin Will Cost You More Than You Want to Pay,” “Homosexuality is Perversion,” “Sodomy Is Sin,” and “For the Wages of Sin Is Death (Romans 6:23).” Others wore over-the-shoulder sandwich billboards that had messages like “Jesus Must Be Your Lord or He Will Not Be Your Savior” and “Jesus said: Go, and Sin No More! Conditional forgiveness, Limited time offer, Read the Bible!” They showed up again in 2019 and gathered across the street from the craft market, which was located roughly where the parade would begin. There was a large police

presence, so the atmosphere by the protesters was tense, but everyone was pretty calm. Small groups of the pro-Pride parade folks gathered and quietly made fun of the racist, homophobic religious group. In my memory, at least, there were no direct interactions other than a bit of yelling.

The religious group marched in front of the parade, bullhorns going, but the folks in the Pride parade itself seemed bent on ignoring them. The actual Starkville Pride organization headed up the parade, and several drag queens, including Godiva (Eric), rode in convertibles and waved to the crowd. Some groups had put together floats, including a group of veterinary students I met later in the same apartment complex where I was staying at the Airbnb. A marching band played “When the Saints Go Marching In.” I decided to focus on getting wide shots, as I knew that Jonathan was closer to the crowd, and I ran around trying to find some high ground. At one point I ran up inside a bar on Main Street and filmed from the second story balcony. The parade marched up University Drive towards town hall at the top of the hill, turned left, turned left again after a block, and marched down Lampkin back to the park where the craft fair had been located. I filmed some of the return, and then the crowd mostly dispersed. I went back to the Airbnb, met the veterinary students, hung out with them for a bit, and then got ready to head to Rick’s Café for the drag show.

The drag show was also delightful, and I had a great time filming it, though I was a bit worried about sound and lighting, since it was so dark. After my batteries started to wind down (both literally and figuratively), I headed back to the Airbnb. I wasn’t feeling great at the time, so I actually packed up early and headed back to Oxford, where I made it in after midnight.

Unfortunately, after that weekend my health took a turn for the worse. I had been struggling with a chronic pain condition for several years. I had disc degeneration disease; two of

the discs in my lower back (L4-L5 and L5-S1) had degenerated quite badly over several years. I had had a short burst of back pain in Tuscaloosa in 2014, but was fine after resting for a weekend. The first bad spell happened in Oxford in the summer of 2016, when I struggled for several months, had my first MRI, and started seeing physical therapists. Eventually I got better, for a given definition of better, and was able to resume normal activities. But my back problems persisted over the next couple of years.

In the spring of 2019, the pain flared up again and didn't get better, even with medication and physical therapy. I got a steroid shot for the first time shortly after Starkville Pride, which is the next step in treatment, but it didn't do much. The weekend before Oxford's Pride parade, the problems escalated rapidly. I woke up with pins and needles all the way down my right leg, which had never happened before. A couple of days later I had excruciating pain in my lower back; I could barely walk from my bed to my kitchen and back. I managed to set up and make it to an appointment with employee health and got temporary pain medication. I already had an MRI scheduled a few days later with the clinic behind the hospital. Then the muscles in my right foot stopped working. The MRI showed that I had a ruptured disc that had fragments floating in my spinal fluid, and that it had severely impacted my sciatic nerve, which was what had shut down the muscle function in my right leg and foot. I needed a lumbar laminectomy, a surgical procedure to clean out the rupture, as soon as possible. The doctor had an opening the next day.

I had surgery on May 12, 2019, and fortunately it was successful. But the recovery meant that I couldn't lift heavy objects for months, couldn't drive for several weeks and couldn't drive long distances for a couple of months. I was overwhelmed at that point, and didn't know if I'd be able to keep working on this project at all. I was on medical leave from work for a couple of months and focused on recovery.

If that weren't enough, I had also been applying and interviewing for other law library jobs. I had already been on one campus visit, and I had to withdraw from two more, as I wouldn't be able to travel for at least six weeks after the surgery. One of them was very gracious but said that timeline wouldn't work for them. The other said that they would be happy to wait, and fly me up when I had recovered enough. That was the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where I eventually (six-ish weeks later) interviewed and was offered a job. I took it, immediately focused on moving several hundred miles and building a new life, and left my MFA plans in limbo.

Though I managed to complete this project in a different format, I wish that I had been able to spend more time in Starkville. I did not get to follow up with any of my contacts for interviews or learn more about the city. Though the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University are the two biggest public universities in the state and are similar in some ways, they also have many differences. I know Oxford and the University of Mississippi well, and I wish that I had been able to learn more about Starkville, the university, and the culture of those places. Starkville Pride was very different from Tupelo Pride, and both are very different from Oxford Pride, and the culture and material differences all contribute to that.

CHAPTER FOUR

OXFORD: Sustaining Resistance and Visibility with Queer Joy

Oxford currently has the longest running annual Pride event in north Mississippi. In 2015, Matt Kessler, then a graduate student at the University of Mississippi, worked with the Isom Center to organize the first Pride parade in Oxford in recent years.⁷⁵ A small group of lesbians had a small Pride march in the late 1990s, but felt discouraged after the attempt and did not try again.⁷⁶ The 2015 parade was more successful; several hundred people showed up to march and a few hundred more lined the streets (especially on the square, where, in true Oxford fashion, they could have drinks on the balconies of several of the city's bars). Kessler had worked with the Isom Center the year before to organize a showing of *Small Town Gay Bar* and a subsequent drag show at the Lamar Lounge that featured queens from the film.⁷⁷ That event

⁷⁵ Harker, Jaime and Barrett, Frankie, "Harker, Jaime (part 1 of 2)" (2018). *Queer Mississippi (Complete Collection)*. 18. <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/queerms/18> and Harker, Jaime and Barrett, Frankie, "Harker, Jaime (part 2 of 2)" (2018). *Queer Mississippi (Complete Collection)*. 41. <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/queerms/41>.

⁷⁶ Stratton, Gail and Heying, Sarah, "Stratton, Gail" (2018). *Queer Mississippi (Complete Collection)*. 19. <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/queerms/19>

⁷⁷ Humphries, Nature, "Queens to Seize Lamar Lounge March 25th - Highly Anticipated Drag Show Is Part of the University's Gender Conference," *The Local Voice*, March 23, 2015. <https://www.thelocalvoice.net/oxford/queens-to-seize-lamar-lounge-march-25th-highly-anticipated-drag-show-is-part-of-universitys-gender-conference/>

was also a huge success. No one had any idea beforehand what kind of response it would get, but the event filled the Lamar Lounge to capacity with an even longer line of folks waiting outside.⁷⁸

LGBTQ+ organizing at the University of Mississippi had been going on for years, though subject to the inconsistencies of student organizing. Like Tupelo and Starkville, there had always been some kind of queer community or network in Oxford. Gay house parties or lesbian potlucks, welcoming Unitarian Universalist church services, hanging out at queer-friendly bars like Jubilee or the Blind Pig, bringing speakers like John Howard or Judy Shepard or Dustin Lance Black to campus, student socials with the GSA or UM Pride Network, and more provided space for meeting fellow LGBTQ+ friends or partners, discovering and negotiating identity, and building community. But like Tupelo and Starkville, putting on a full Pride parade through the middle of the square in Oxford – or later holding an event in the Grove on campus – was a degree of visibility that went beyond what had come before.

Why a Pride parade? Given the challenges and the potential for backlash, why did queer Mississippians begin organizing Pride parades and other events in 2015 and 2016? Part of the reason might lie in a number of controversies in the years immediately preceding this organizing. Major events on the national, state, and local level threw queerness into stark relief and made queer existence in Mississippi more overtly political than it had been before.

On the national level, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down their decision to legalize gay marriage in *Obergefell v. Hodges* on June 26, 2015, and kicked off both jubilant celebrations and a right-wing backlash. Preceded by *U.S. v. Windsor* in 2013, which struck down portions of the federal Defense of Marriage Act and allowed the federal government to recognize same-sex marriage, *Obergefell* struck down state laws preventing same-sex marriage under the Due

⁷⁸ Kohne, Brittany, “A Town of Many Colors: Oxford Pride,” *The Daily Mississippian*. April 28, 2022. <https://thedmonline.com/oxford-pride/>

Process and Equal Protection clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment.⁷⁹ Politicians in many southern states, Mississippi included, quickly responded. Governor Phil Bryant and Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves both spoke out against the decision; other lawmakers openly discussed the possibility that the state might refuse to grant any marriage licenses.⁸⁰ Marriage equality did not immediately go into effect in Mississippi; Attorney General Jim Hood ordered circuit clerks not to issue licenses until the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals lifted a stay on their decision and the federal district court issued an order.⁸¹ The chaos gave many an opportunity to express their displeasure; it would be almost another year before the district court ruled on a decision that prevented clerks from refusing to issue licenses.⁸²

Meanwhile, many same-sex couples in Mississippi took advantage of their new rights and got married. Hattiesburg issued the first license even before Attorney General Hood spoke, so Amber Hamilton and Annice Smith of Hattiesburg became the first couple to marry under the new laws.⁸³ In Oxford, Corey Blount and Kurt Smith received Lafayette County's first same-sex marriage license on June 29, after A.G. Hood ordered clerks to resume issuing licenses.⁸⁴

The backlash was not confined to the issue of marriage; Mississippi legislators began considering the "Religious Freedom Accommodations Act," otherwise known as HB 1523, in February of 2016.⁸⁵ The bill protects people and organizations who have a "sincerely held

⁷⁹ *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 644 (2015) and *U.S. v. Windsor*, 570 U.S. 744 (2013). Roberta Kaplan, the attorney who represented Starkville Pride against the city in that case, was the lead attorney for Windsor.

⁸⁰ Pender, Geoff, "Lawmaker: State Could Stop Marriage Licenses Altogether," *The Clarion-Ledger*, June 26, 2015. <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/politicalledger/2015/06/26/bryant-gay-marriage/29327433/>

⁸¹ "Weddings, Then a Halt in Mississippi," *Greenfield Recorder*, July 5, 2015.

<https://www.recorder.com/Archives/2015/06/GregAP-GayM-Mississippi-GR-062915>

⁸² *Id.*

⁸³ *Id.*

⁸⁴ Kirkland, Logan, "Lafayette County Issues First Same-Sex Marriage License," *The Daily Mississippian*, June 29, 2015. <https://thedmarchives.com/lafayette-county-issues-first-same-sex-marriage/>

⁸⁵ H.B. 1523, Miss. Legis., 2016. <http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/2016/pdf/history/HB/HB1523.xml>

religious belief or moral conviction” that “marriage is or should be recognized as the union of one man and one woman; sexual relations are properly reserved to such a marriage; and male (man) and female (woman) refer to an individual’s immutable biological sex as objectively determined by anatomy and genetics at time of birth.”⁸⁶ In other words, a bakery doesn’t have to make someone a gay wedding cake if they don’t want to, which they didn’t have to do anyway before the bill was passed. The law had other, more insidious consequences: organizations could fire a single mother who got pregnant, adoption agencies could refuse to place a child with a same-sex couple, doctors could refuse health care to a trans patient, and more.⁸⁷ National media covered the bill’s passage and subsequent legal cases and asserted the same tropes about abject Mississippians at the mercy of an oppressive state.⁸⁸ Among other reactions, many states with more progressive electorates banned travel to Mississippi and North Carolina, which had just passed a draconic anti-trans bathroom bill.⁸⁹

In Oxford, recent local events had also galvanized some members of the queer community. In 2013, even before *Obergefell*, the University of Mississippi’s campus endured yet another controversy, this time over the play *The Laramie Project*. On October 1, 2013, a performance of the play was disrupted by heckling from a group of about twenty football players.⁹⁰ Actors later reported that comments were made about not only sexuality, but also

⁸⁶ Id.

⁸⁷ Green, Emma. “Why Mississippi’s Law on Religious Rights and LGBT Discrimination Got Blocked,” *The Atlantic*, July 1, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/why-mississippi-law-on-religious-rights-and-lgbt-got-blocked/489731/>

⁸⁸ Id.

⁸⁹ See, e.g. Stewart, Ali, “New York, Vermont Ban Official Travel to Mississippi Over LGBT Law,” *ABC News 10, Albany NY*, Apr. 6, 2016. <https://www.news10.com/news/new-york-vermont-ban-official-travel-to-mississippi-over-lgbt-law/>

⁹⁰ Hosemann, Justin, “Living ‘The Laramie Project’ at Ole Miss,” *Jackson Free Press*, Oct. 23, 2013. <https://www.jacksonfreepress.com/news/2013/oct/23/living-laramie-project-ole-miss/>

weight and race.⁹¹ The university issued its usual tepid response, held a few town halls that let off steam but didn't result in any actual action, and called it a day. The football players were largely protected by the university, and many in the queer community felt abandoned by the institution.⁹² In her oral history, Jaime Harker described the reaction to the event:

“There was a whole public stance that ‘we just can’t be sure who did this.’ But all the students knew it was the Nkemdiche brothers. It was very clear that they weren’t going to risk the football season. I looked at the chancellor and I said, ‘What I’ve learned from this is that you may feel sorry for us, and you may sympathize with us, but none of you will stand up for us.’ Then, the first version of the Religious Freedom Law came out and we wanted the chancellor to speak out against it and he wouldn’t. At that point, I was going up for promotion to full and I had been asked to step in and do one-year at the Sarah Isom Center. Put all that stuff together and I’m like, okay, this is a good chance, now I can use this position to try to do some things, to make changes and make things better.”⁹³

Other members of queer communities in Mississippi felt similarly about national events. In his interview, Eric White described his reaction to Trump’s election:

“I did not think in a million years, Donald Trump would win. Not in a million years but I notice the moment he won, I felt it. I felt hands on my chest, pushing me backward, I felt the whole thing. I felt the closet door swing open. I’ve got goosebumps thinking about it. Some of my friends were like, ‘I’m not going out. This is not safe. We are not having Pride in the park. We are not doing this. We’re not doing that.’ Yes, we are. I just start pushing hard. I was like, ‘Ok, I’m not doing this.’ So, I start pushing for Pride. I did Biloxi Pride; I started Tupelo Pride with Melanie. Did Oxford Pride – was at the very first Oxford Pride...I was like, I’m bringing Pride to Mississippi one way or the other. We are gonna be out, we’re gonna be proud, we’re gonna be loud!”⁹⁴

In the wake of *Obergefell* backlash, increased legislation targeted at discriminating against queer communities, and local campus controversies, it’s little wonder that queer Mississippians felt the need to stand up, proclaim their presence, celebrate their identities, and

⁹¹ Id.

⁹² Harker, Jaime and Barrett, Frankie, "Harker, Jaime (part 1 of 2)" (2018). *Queer Mississippi (Complete Collection)*. 18. <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/queerms/18> and Harker, Jaime and Barrett, Frankie, "Harker, Jaime (part 2 of 2)" (2018). *Queer Mississippi (Complete Collection)*. 41. <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/queerms/41>.

⁹³ Id.

⁹⁴ White, Eric "Godiva" and Shapple, Maddie, "White, Eric "Godiva"" (2019). *Queer Mississippi (Complete Collection)*. 12. <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/queerms/12>

lay claim to central, public, visible space in the state. But while anger and defiance are absolutely cornerstones of Pride events, they aren't the only emotions expressed there. Queer joy is a key part of Pride events.

Pride in Mississippi is difficult to sustain. Many are run through volunteer organizations or by people who get paid little for their work. As Eric White and Rick Gladish pointed out in their oral histories, many of the central figures in the communities poured a great deal of their own money, time, and labor into these efforts, whether running a bar or organizing drag shows while working full-time. In university towns like Oxford and Starkville, students bring a great deal of enthusiasm and urgency to organizing, but turnover is high, and activity levels of various groups can vary wildly depending on who is running them. Even the more stable organizations like the Isom Center at the University of Mississippi or the Link Center in Tupelo do not have to do this work; though it fits their mission, they could also choose to take on less visible work that would provoke less discrimination or backlash. The pandemic threw all of this into stark relief. Most Pride events in 2020 were canceled or moved online out of concern for people's safety. It would have been all too easy to let them go. Given the challenges of sustaining this work, the potential consequences, and an uncertain future, a wide spectrum of people, resources, labor, and emotion is needed to sustain this work. One of the least recognized pieces that sustains it is queer joy.

Documenting Pride parades in Mississippi can address this omission, as well as offer a corrective to the abject and oppressed stereotypes about queer life in the state. Queer joy is rarely a focus in any discussions of LGBTQ+ life, whether in mainstream media or academia, much less in anything focused on the South. Narratives about queer life are often framed by negative experiences: oppression, isolation, loneliness, violence. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara

Ahmed explores the idea of the “unhappy queer” as a part of queer genealogy and affect. She argues that stories about both queer happiness and unhappiness matter, but that it depends on what kind of story is being told. Conventional narratives construct queer life as an unhappy because it is “a life without the ‘things’ that make you happy, or as a life that is depressed as it lacks certain things: ‘a husband, children.’”⁹⁵ But unhappiness in the face of an unjust world can be a method for imagining different, better worlds, or at least for accurately naming and identifying the ways in which the present world is unhappy. Representations of people who are “happily queer in the face of a world that is unhappy with queer lives and loves can be energizing, can give us hope...it is thus possible to give an account of being happily queer that does not conceal signs of struggle.”⁹⁶ It’s difficult for me to think of a better representation of being happily queer in the face of a world unhappy with queer lives than putting on a Pride Parade in Mississippi.

Amy Tooth Murphy argues that structuring queer documentary work around queer joy rather than oppression – for all that oppression and trauma are a reality for many – “has the radical power to counter and destabilize normative expectations for the structuring themes and experiences of a queer life.”⁹⁷ In her work interviewing butch lesbians and other gender non-conforming people, Murphy notes that they are used to the laughter of others at their gender presentation, but during the oral histories she recorded, they “reclaimed laughter and used it to affirm and nurture butch identity and butch experience via that affective intimacy” by turning laughter “into an intersubjective experience to which we consent.”⁹⁸ Laughter gave Murphy and

⁹⁵ Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press, 2010. 93.

⁹⁶ *Id.* at 118.

⁹⁷ Murphy, Amy Tooth, “In Search of Queer Composure: Queer Temporality, Intimacy, and Affect,” in *New Directions in Queer Oral History: Archives of Disruption*, ed. Clare Summerskill, Amy Tooth Murphy, and Emma Vickers, Routledge (2022). 169.

⁹⁸ *Id.*

her narrators a way to reclaim their experiences and think differently about the narratives that structure their lives.

Two other articles look at particular kinds of queer joy and their affect to make similar arguments. Reagan Patrick Mitchell stresses the importance of joy to resistance of an oppressive world in his article, “The Art of Ridicule: Black Queer Joy in the Face of the Fatigues.”⁹⁹ Mitchell identifies an explicitly Black version of queer joy – and an explicitly queer version of Black joy – as a method through which artists like Sylvester and Big Freedia navigate a world of “heteronormative/cisgendered violence, white supremacy, and classism.”¹⁰⁰ Queer Black joy provides sustenance in the face of what Mitchell terms queer and Black battle fatigue, the experience of trying to live in a world arrayed against you. Stef Shuster and Laurel Westbrook’s “Reducing the Joy Deficit in Sociology: A Study of Transgender Joy,” pushes back against sociological scholarship’s “focus on negative experiences and inequality” by interviewing transgender people about their experiences of joy in their identity. They found four major themes: “1) the value of asking about joy, 2) the joy of being from a marginalized group, 3) the improvement of quality of life, and 4) the increased connections with others.”¹⁰¹ Both emphasize the power of collective identity, and how the experience of joy can motivate people towards change.

Other scholars note the importance of emotions like fun and laughter to social movements. Asa Wettergren writes about the role positive emotions play in culture jamming, what she defines as “a form of protest located within a field of anti-corporate activism where tensions between democratic principles and the undemocratic principles of the ‘free’ market are

⁹⁹ Mitchell, R.P., “The Art of Ridicule: Queer Black Joy in the Face of the Fatigues,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 35, issue 2, 1-17, February 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Id. at 2.

¹⁰¹ Id. at 7.

articulated as pivotal contemporary political conflicts.”¹⁰² Culture jamming is often a symbolic protest, where participants target corporate symbols and co-opt and transform them in ways that push back against corporate takeover. While Pride in Mississippi is not an explicitly anti-corporate protest (some participants certainly hold those views, while others welcome the participation of major businesses like Toyota), the use of key symbolic public spaces like the square, the grove, main street, and town hall and their takeover do point out a central political tension in a similar way – queer people exist in Mississippi, are at the center of the state’s space, and deserve to be there.

Wettegren points out that invoking positive emotions like fun and laughter benefits protests and their organizers in several ways: “fun...both guarantees activists an instant reward and attracts bystanders to join the protest ‘for the fun of it,’” “humorous protest lowers the risk of angry reactions,” it’s a means to gain public trust, and it creates a sense of emotional energy and collective identity.¹⁰³ Culture jammers invoke this collective energy to push back against the dead feeling of operating under consumer culture. Similarly, Pride events give participants and observers a collective sense of belonging and positive emotion, a marked contrast to the stereotypical feelings of isolation and oppression so often attributed to the condition of being queer. Fun, laughter, happiness, and joy are a means to mobilize people as well as criticize and ridicule the opposition to Pride.

Centering joy as a key part of Pride in Mississippi does a number of things. It helps us better understand the community by combatting oversimplified stereotypes depicting queer life in the state as oppressed and abject. It helps explain why people keep organizing Pride parades

¹⁰² Wettegren, Asa, “Fun and Laughter: Culture Jamming and the Emotional Regime of Late Capitalism,” *Social Movement Studies*, 8:1 (2009). 2.

¹⁰³ Id. at 7-10.

and events even in the face of many challenges. And it gives us an argument for why we should keep these events going. Positive emotions like joy are a key part of mobilizing people to imagine and fight for a better world, one in which queer Mississippians are not just tolerated, but fully accepted as a visible, valued part of society.

PROCESS:

I left Oxford in July of 2019 to start my new job in North Carolina. I still wanted to finish the MFA – I only needed six more thesis hours and, of course, an actual thesis – but I had no idea what that would look like. Initially I decided that I would spend my first year at UNC learning the new job, getting used to a new place, and building a new community for myself. Once I felt more settled, I wanted to return to thinking about how to finish the MFA Documentary Program. I found a new physical therapist and continued working on recovering from surgery. Abruptly being cut off from the friends, colleagues, and community I had been building for four years in Mississippi was very difficult, but I tried hard to make it work. I did also struggle with what I now realize was depression, though at the time I attributed it to post-surgery fatigue and the upheaval of my life, and tried to push through.

Before I could get used to the new job and place and life, however, two more problems arose: the COVID-19 pandemic and the return of my lower back problems, both of which took a turn for the worse in March 2020. The University of North Carolina ordered its staff to start working from home during spring break, and extended spring break an extra week. At the time, we thought we'd be back by the end of March, maybe early April. Little did we know that we wouldn't be back on campus for almost a year and a half.

At the same time, my lower back pain flared up again, and I started the long process of finding a new doctor and playing hurry up and wait with appointments, medication, and x-rays. Eventually I had another MRI, which showed that the disc that had ruptured had herniated again, and I would need another surgery to fix it. I chose to have spinal fusion surgery instead of another laminectomy. Rather than clean out the herniation, fusion surgery would remove what was left of the two degenerated discs and fuse those three vertebrae together. It was a more intense surgery, but would have the benefit of solving the problem rather than kicking the can down the road again.

The world continued to feel like it was on fire. The uprisings of 2020 in the wake of George Floyd's death hit North Carolina as well as the rest of the country; I tried to go to one march on campus but had to leave early because I was in too much pain to stand up for the speeches. The University of North Carolina, like the University of Mississippi, did not handle the pandemic well. I continued to feel isolated and frightened about both the state of the world and my own personal health.

I went on medical leave again in November of 2020 and spent three days in the hospital. My father came up from Alabama to help me for three weeks. The surgery was successful, though it was a very painful and draining experience. I stayed on leave through Christmas, spending most of my time on bedrest, and then went back to work in January. The projected recovery for my multi-level spinal fusion surgery was a year and a half; I wasn't allowed to bend, twist, or lift anything over ten pounds for the first six months.

Fortunately, I was still working from home. I did my best to make it through the semester, which was not easy. I am both a staff and a faculty member at UNC, so I have a forty hour a week job for twelve months a year. But I also teach one class a year as an overage. I

effectively came back early from surgery recovery in order to work overtime. I was still in new job mode and did not want to ask for too much. If I had known how difficult and painful the post-fusion recovery was going to be, I might have made different choices. But I made it, though not without a cost to my mental and emotional health.

The COVID vaccine arrived in the spring of 2021, and I got my two shots in April. The semester ended, and it felt like things were opening back up. I still didn't know how to finish the MFA. I had dinner with Hooper one evening and we started talking about it, and he just looked at me and said, "Why don't you just do something with what you already have? Like a photo essay or something similar? Oxford Pride is in a couple of weeks, go back and photograph that and you'll have enough." I was a lot more enthusiastic about that idea than anything else I'd come up with up to that point. I got in touch with Antonia, one of my best friends in Oxford, and she could pick me up at the airport, lend me a car, and put me up in their guest house for a few days. I thought that I'd try photographing Pride in the Grove, and if it worked out, then I might have a thesis project. And if it didn't, I would have had a nice vacation in Oxford with my friends.

I kept it fairly simple this time around, partly because I had been out of touch, partly because I wasn't sure this idea would even work. I think that I emailed Jaime to make sure it would be okay for me to take some photos, and then just showed up on the day of to hang out in the Grove. Everyone was in good spirits; the vaccine had been around for several months and most of the folks I talked to had gotten theirs. Delta and Omicron had not yet appeared, so we were in a different phase of the pandemic where it felt like the end – or an end, at least – was in sight. Everyone was happy to be back out and seeing each other in person after months of social distancing. I thought that I would feel strange because I had been gone for two years, but instead I found that everyone else hadn't seen each other in a year and a half as well.

Nevertheless, documenting the event wasn't easy for me. I struggled with the camera; I hadn't taken photographs in almost two years. The day was hot and humid, and we all fought fatigue from the heat and spent a lot of time going back and forth between the Grove and the air-conditioned student union. I was also only seven months out of surgery and only recently back in physical therapy, and I'd only been able to lift anything over ten pounds for about a month. Even wrangling the camera bag worried me a bit. Other than the day of Pride, I spent most of the morning and some of the afternoon in bed while I was in Oxford.

I did feel like I got a handful of good pictures, so I came out of the experience excited about those. The day was long but filled with fun events. Various local organizations set up information tents during the afternoon. The local farmer's market had a tent, and its director, Betsy Chapman, was giving away free squash. Capital City Pride had a tent, as did the Mississippi chapter of the Human Rights Campaign. An anti-domestic violence organization from Memphis had a tent as well. The university's Writing and Rhetoric department pitched in with a tent, and several of that department's faculty were there for much of the day. There was exactly one corporate tent – New York Life Insurance company, and they were giving out free rainbow bracelets. The Oxford and Lafayette County Police departments both had tents, and they were strategically placed on the other end of the row from the Students Against Social Injustice (SASI) organization, who were displaying a “No Pigs at Pride” poster and handing out abolitionist zines. The local Unitarian Universalists also had a tent, and many of their members, both queer and allies, were in attendance.

Pride in the Grove took advantage of the stage to offer a number of performances. Early in the day, attendees competed in a costume contest, and later a local classic rock cover band played David Bowie and Melissa Ethridge songs. The stage had a screen set up, and in between

sets the event organizers (headed up, as far as I could tell, by Kevin Cozart of the Isom Center) played music videos – mostly country with queer connections, like Lil Nas X and Orville Peck’s video with Shania Twain. Early in the day, the university’s vice-provost, Noel Wilkin, gave a speech welcoming people to Pride on campus. Afterwards, he made sure to speak to every information tent, though he also requested that the UM Pride Network tent put away the condoms because, as he explained, this was a family event.¹⁰⁴ The mayor of Oxford, Robyn Tannehill, filmed a welcome address that was shown on the stage screen, but did not attend in person. The night ended with a drag show, and I recognized Godiva Holliday (Eric, as always) and many of the other queens from Tupelo and Starkville. Many of my friends were in the Grove that day, and I got to catch up with everyone in between taking photos.

Oxford in 2021 felt like a good place to land the thesis. Everyone was happy to be back out after a year and a half of COVID distancing.¹⁰⁵ Having the Pride celebration in the Grove rather than as a march around the square gave the day a different feeling. It was more like a party with friends rather than a visible statement of celebrating identity. The arrangement was mostly circumstantial – other major events were taking place in Oxford that weekend, so the Isom Center couldn’t get the permit for the square. They went looking for another location and wound up in the Grove. Many of my friends remarked that it felt more like an event for the LGBTQ+ community, and some pointed out that they felt like the parade was as much for allies as it was for queer folks.

I saw more people who looked visibly queer in the Grove than I had in past parades; more people were wearing clothes or hairstyles or other visual markers that were nonbinary or

¹⁰⁴ Author’s conversation with Jaime Harker.

¹⁰⁵ We were in the time period after the vaccine had become widely available, but before the Delta and later Omicron waves started.

genderqueer or trans – that were clearly meant to not be heteronormative. The one central space gave people a different opportunity to negotiate visibility than the more public march around downtown. I personally was very happy to be back among friends who know that I’m ace, and the sense of community and the joy of celebrating LGBTQ+ identities in the metaphorical heart of the University of Mississippi was clearly something everyone enjoyed. Pandemic notwithstanding, it was clear Pride events would keep going in Mississippi, so I flew back to North Carolina hopeful that I could turn what I had into something workable for a thesis. I made sure to backup all my photos, found my old hard drive, got back in touch with the SouthDocs folks, and began working on a thesis prospectus and committee.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Documenting Pride parades in Mississippi reveals both a break from the past and a continuation of it. Previous eras had been marked by quiet accommodation of queer individuals, a level of tolerance, if not acceptance. Pride parades in the state are a visible, public celebration of all kinds of queer identity. These events help us see the communities that have always been there; many of the people involved in running gay bars or organizing drag shows or starting PFLAG groups took the lead in Pride as well. But there's a difference between a gay bar out in the county, an occasional drag night, or a monthly meeting, and a takeover of central public space in Mississippi cities. Pride in Mississippi is still bound by material realities; few permanent LGBTQ+ spaces exist in the state, little in the way of funding from non-profits or other sources, and many of the people who create these events pour their time and money into them while holding down full-time jobs and other commitments. But the activities are far more visible and celebratory, and demonstrate a new unwillingness by many to accept being silent in exchange for a lack of outright hostility.

The three cities that I documented for this project speak to the new level of visibility, consequences for that visibility, and what it takes to keep that work going in different ways.

Tupelo demonstrates the need to see queer community in a different way – a mix of quiet accommodation and circulating networks transformed into a highly visible but temporary takeover of public space, showing that queer folks are here but also allowing for a negotiation of visibility. Starkville experienced the potential consequences of the shift, which brought both institutional discrimination and outright right-wing protest. But that same heightened visibility, though it came with pushback, inspired more Pride events. Though I wrote about Tupelo first in this project, their first Pride event was partly a result of Starkville’s troubles; Melanie Deas brought up Starkville in her conversation with the mayor of Tupelo when asking if he would push back in the same way as the other city’s aldermen.¹⁰⁶ Oxford Pride started even earlier and inspired those in Starkville and others across the state.

This new level of visibility didn’t appear in a vacuum; many of the events were organized in direct response to local, state, and national events. Some, like Hattiesburg’s early Pride events in 2015, may have been inspired by the new rights accorded to LGBTQ+ folks by *Obergefell*. Others, like Oxford’s ongoing student organizing that resulted in the first Pride parade, was at least partly a response to homophobic events on campus and anti-LGBTQ+ state legislation like HB 1523. Other cities picked up the baton in the wake of Trump’s election and his administration’s targeting of queer people in many ways.

Though Trump lost the election to Biden, and some things have changed, the work is nowhere near over. The pandemic and the outbreak of protest in the wake of George Floyd’s murder laid bare many inequities of our society. The threat of the COVID virus has made organizing even more difficult; it is hard to do the same kind of work when we cannot be in the same rooms with each other, even with a vaccine. And a right-wing backlash to the progressive

¹⁰⁶ Deas, Melanie and Buckingham, Danielle, "Deas, Melanie" (2021). *Queer Mississippi (Complete Collection)*. 48. <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/queerms/48>

push of 2020 is in full swing in 2022, and a great deal of it targets LGBTQ+ people. 2021 set the record for anti-LGBTQ+ legislation introduced and passed in state legislatures; according to the ACLU, 250 bills were introduced, and 2022 is on track to pass that record.¹⁰⁷ The majority are anti-trans bills, focused on school sports, bathrooms, and restricting health care. Even as I was writing the final draft of this thesis, the United States Supreme Court handed down *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, a case that originated in the state of Mississippi and overturned women's right to an abortion that had previously been protected by *Roe v. Wade*.¹⁰⁸ Justice Alito's opinion in *Dobbs* also questioned the basis of *Obergefell*, a clear warning shot from the right that indicates the court may reconsider same-sex marriage as well. Meanwhile in Oxford, a young queer Black man went missing, and as of early August 2022, his body has not yet been found.¹⁰⁹ The dangers on the local, state, and federal level are still very real.

At the same time, there have been positive changes. Queer visibility has increased in north Mississippi in many ways. Many campuses in the state, including the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State, have Lavender Graduations every year, honoring their LGBTQ+ graduates, and high-ranking administrators often speak at these and similar events on campus. I went to the second Lavender Graduation at the University of Mississippi, and the chancellor spoke; at Pride in the Grove, one of the vice-provosts made a short speech. This would have been nearly unimaginable just a few years ago.

¹⁰⁷ ACLU, "Legislation Affecting LGBTQ Rights Across the Country," updated every Friday and last accessed August 2022. <https://www.aclu.org/legislation-affecting-lgbtq-rights-across-country>

¹⁰⁸ *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, No. 19-1392, 597 U.S. ____.

¹⁰⁹ Jira, Violet, "Bond Hearing Postponed for Man Charged With Student's Murder," *The Daily Mississippian*, July 27, 2022. <https://thedmonline.com/bond-hearing-postponed-for-man-charged-with-students-murder/>

In 2022, the mayor of Oxford and the town’s board of aldermen signed an official proclamation declaring June Pride Month in the city.¹¹⁰ The proclamation states: “The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) communities of Oxford, Mississippi are an integral part of the vibrant culture and climate of Oxford...The diverse LGBTQ community continues to contribute to the widespread academic, economic, artistic and social spheres within and around our greater community.”¹¹¹ This would not have happened without Pride. Quiet accommodation does not get you here.

For many, this is a step forward and an important sign to students and younger members of the queer community. Others acknowledge that this is still not enough, that stronger actions are needed. For all that the mayor issued a proclamation, she has never yet appeared in person at a Pride event in Oxford. HRC and the ACLU have had some success in pushing a few cities to adopt nondiscrimination ordinances, though like in the case of Starkville, some of those ordinances have been repealed. And as a friend of mine proudly noted on Facebook last month, “Drag shows are normal in Oxford now.” Though we are far from where we should be, queer visibility is now more acceptable in a way that it was not before.

Rather than an abject, isolated minority in an oppressive state, LGBTQ+ organizing in Mississippi is a push-pull of a fight for visibility and rights, undertaken in a larger context of a rightward trend in American politics. Queer communities definitely exist in the state, and with the advent of these Mississippi Pride events, they and their allies are more visible than ever. But the legislature has a Republican supermajority, and the state remains deeply conservative. Queer Mississippians are embattled but not alone, constrained by an oppressive state and limited

¹¹⁰ Boyte, Mary, “June is Officially Pride Month in Oxford,” *The Daily Mississippian*, June 23, 2022. <https://thedmonline.com/june-is-officially-pride-month-in-oxford/>

¹¹¹ Id.

resources but still able to build community and joy. Not only that, but LGBTQ+ folks don't only fight for themselves, but also for other progressive causes and communities.

This, too, is a change from earlier eras. In their 2017 work on oppression in Mississippi higher education, K.K. Strunk et al. note:

“[There is] an increasing attention among queer activists and community organizations to issues of intersectionality. Recently, LGBTQ rights groups in the state have participated in calling for gun reform, writing letters in support of Black Lives Matter, and attending advocacy sessions around immigrants, as well as voting rights. The recognition that oppression is shared, and often oppression of one group is targeted to or affects another, seems important... There also appears to be an increasing recognition of the fact that queer people of color are especially marginalized and subject to multiple layers of oppression.”¹¹²

With more education and more visibility, many allies also recognize the interconnectedness of marginalization. Though I've focused on LGBTQ+ organizing in this project, all of this took place in the context of other progressive political organizing.

In Oxford, crossover was common in campus and student organizing. Beginning with community response to the Charleston massacre in 2015 and ending (or at least significantly shifting gears) with the onset of the COVID pandemic in March of 2020, Oxford saw actions for many progressive causes. Black student groups led a fight to remove the state flag (which at the time included the Confederate flag) from campus and advocated for the removal of the Confederate statue from the circle in front of the Lyceum.¹¹³ Faculty, staff, and students founded the state's first labor union chapter for higher education in the fall of 2018: Communication Workers of America-United Campus Workers chapter 3565. Local groups like the Wise Women,

¹¹² Strunk, Kamden K., Leslie Ann Locke, and Georgianna L. Martin, *Oppression and Resistance in Southern Higher and Adult Education: Mississippi and the Dynamics of Equity and Social Justice*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 169.

¹¹³ Campbell, Ellie, “A Week in the Life of Ole Miss: February 2019 and the Fight to Take Down the Confederate Statue,” *The Activist History Review*, Dec. 16, 2019. <https://activisthistory.com/2019/12/16/a-week-in-the-life-of-ole-miss-february-2019-and-the-fight-to-take-down-the-confederate-statue/>

Indivisible, and Moms Against Gun Violence organized women's marches, gun control, immigrants' rights protests, health care awareness activities, and other events. Professors and students began prison abolition projects, including the MUMI conference and Parchman Oral History Project. Campus workers founded the first labor union chapter for higher education in Mississippi, CWA-UCW 3565. More established groups like the Lafayette County Democratic Executive Committee and the local chapter of the NAACP headed up (and worked together with everyone else) on several state Democratic races in the fall of 2018. Though these efforts differed in focus, they often overlapped in organizers, participants, and tactics. Efforts included letters to the editor, petitions to student, staff, and faculty governance, direct action protests, attending town halls, printing flyers, basketball players taking a knee, door knocking for the candidates and issues, and working with attorneys and state officials to look at voting districts.

It seemed like everything was happening all the time, and the opposition often felt too overwhelming to tackle. But on the other hand, a better understanding of intersectionality sometimes meant that it felt like working on one problem was working on all of them. Collective joy was key for all of this organizing. Often people showed up to the fight because they were angry and afraid. But they came back because they found joy and community and solidarity in the work. Pride parades in Mississippi best demonstrate what that looks like for LGBTQ+ organizing. Pride holds two truths at the same time: the world is full of violence and despair, but also joy and community. Focusing only on the violence misses the larger reason that people keep fighting and working to build a better Mississippi for everyone: because they love the place and its people, and want to see it become better for everyone.

I was deeply affected by this work, not only the Pride events that I documented and participated in, but also the labor union work and knocking doors with the Democrats and

organizing women's marches with Indivisible. My health might not have been the best during this time, but this work and these communities kept me going. I came to understand myself better, and to understand how to be a better member of a community, someone who can try (and often fail) to stand in solidarity with others. As someone who is ace, I'm in a very small minority. While I would like space in my life to be in community with other ace people, collective organizing and solidarity with other marginalized groups is key to creating better lives for ourselves, better understanding of ourselves, and a world in which many different relationships to attraction and sex are recognized and accepted. It could be fraught; working along intersectional lines engages not only people from many different identities and experiences, who do not always have the same goals, but also usually have a lot of strong personalities regardless of background. But I really valued the kind of solidarity shown by many in the community who were willing to show up for any number of causes, and who understood that the struggles of marginalized groups are all linked. I could have shaped this thesis around myself and my own identity, but I have resisted doing that. That doesn't reflect my understanding of these events, and I am more interested in thinking about how community and solidarity work to create change.

It can be difficult to describe what doing this work felt like, and how I understood the interconnectedness of the different kinds of organizing. A piece I wrote in the fall of 2018 exemplifies what the experience of living through these moments was like, so I want to finish this thesis with that text. I wrote it for a class project; we had to make a zine and I was in the middle of editing the film about Tupelo, so I wrote about that and used stills from the film footage. On October 29, 2018, I wrote this:

Tupelo, Mississippi, held its first ever Pride event – not a parade, but a gathering at Fair Park and a march down the street to Gateway Park and back – on October 6, 2018. It was

the same day that Justice Kavanaugh, who had been nominated by President Trump, was confirmed and sworn in to the United States Supreme Court, after a weeks-long battle in which he was accused of attempting to rape one of his high school classmates, Christine Blasey Ford. Two other women accused him of attempted rape as well, and Dr. Ford testified in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee for several hours. Despite the accusation, Kavanaugh was confirmed as the 114th Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

I spent the day in Tupelo with my phone turned off.

As I'm writing this, I just attended an event at the University of Mississippi's law school, where a room full of LGBTQ and African-American and Latinx law students talked to each other about how to be good allies, and talked to the law school (at least those of us present) about what the school could do to make the environment better for them. I spent Sunday canvassing for current Democratic candidates for U.S. Senate and House seats in Mississippi. I missed going to a Memphis protest in support of the transgender community. Saturday I attended the unveiling of a historical marker for the last lynching in Lafayette County, where 80 family members and several hundred community members showed up. On Friday I spent a great couple of hours interviewing Melanie and Eric, who were involved in planning and running the Tupelo Event.

Meanwhile, earlier in the week, the Trump administration released a statement saying they were considering defining transgender out of existence in American law. On Saturday morning, an armed man entered a synagogue in Pittsburgh and opened fire on the congregation, killing 11 people. A different gunman killed two African-Americans in a Kroger in Louisville after attempting to enter a Black church. Pipe bombs were mailed to major Democratic figures and news headquarters on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Ntozake Shange died.

And that's only this week. Every day I see people in Oxford trying to make a difference. We chartered a labor union chapter this week. But right-wing media are targeting one of our professors – a friend of mine. And the chancellor of the university reprimanded him on Facebook, playing right into the hands of those who would silence us. The student paper published an issue a few weeks ago highlighting the experience of African-Americans on campus and exploring intersectional identity and what it means for those students. But before that, an alum and donor posted a derogatory, racist, sexist post on Facebook where he blamed Black women for bringing down property value in Oxford. Student and faculty and staff protest pushed the university to consider taking the alum's name off the journalism department, but efforts at addressing that controversy seem to have stalled out.

The midterm elections are eight days away.

Ok, I lied – I turned my phone back on to take that picture of Elvis.

We've canvassed almost 3000 doors and sent out over 7000 postcards in Lafayette County and the surrounding area in north Mississippi.

But Trump just declared that he's considering revoking birthright citizenship and sent thousands of troops to the southern border to meet a caravan of refugees from Honduras. Brazil just elected a far-right, fascist president, who is homophobic, pro-torture, and has threatened to privatize the Amazon. His supporters have shut down classes at multiple universities for teaching subjects they don't like.

I don't know where all of this is going.

I just know I've got to write some more postcards to Chickasaw County.

In the meantime, enjoy all the rainbows.

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Films:

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VITA

EDUCATION

Master of Fine Arts in Documentary Expression

University of Mississippi, expected August 2022

Master of Library and Information Studies

University of Alabama, August 2014

With a Concentration in Archives

Juris Doctorate

University of Alabama, May 2013

Master of American Studies

King's College London, January 2008

Master of Southern Studies

University of Mississippi, May 2006

Bachelor of Arts in Theater

Vanderbilt University, May 2004

LIBRARY EXPERIENCE

Reference Librarian

August 2019 – Present

University of North Carolina, Katherine R. Everett Law Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Public Services Law Librarian

August 2015 – July 2019

University of Mississippi, Grisham Law Library, Oxford, Mississippi

Archives Assistant

July 2014 – July 2015

University of Alabama, Bounds Law Library, Tuscaloosa, Alabama

Graduate Teaching Assistant

August 2013 – May 2014

University of Alabama, W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library

Faculty Research Assistant <i>University of Alabama, Bounds Law Library</i>	May 2012 – July 2014
Senior Library Assistant <i>Austin Community College, Austin, Texas</i>	September 2009 – July 2010
Senior Library Assistant <i>University of Mississippi, J.D. Williams Library, Archives</i>	August 2007 – July 2009

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Clinical Associate Professor of Law (2021-present)

Clinical Assistant Professor of Law (2019-2021)

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Courses:

- | | |
|---|---------------------|
| • Advanced Legal Research | Spring 2021-present |
| • Advanced Legal Research (co-taught with Stacey Rowland) | Spring 2020 |

Instructor (2015-2019)

University of Mississippi, Khayat Law Center

Courses:

- | | |
|---|-----------------------|
| • Introduction to Legal Research | Fall-Spring 2015-2019 |
| • Intermediate Legal Research (co-taught with other librarians) | Summer 2016-2018 |
| • Law and Science Fiction 1 (co-taught with Antonia Eliason) | Fall 2016-2018 |
| • Law and Science Fiction 2 (co-taught with Antonia Eliason) | Spring 2017-2018 |

Adjunct Instructor (2015)

University of Alabama, School of Library and Information Studies

Courses:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| • Law Libraries and Legal Resources | Summer 2015 |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|

LEGAL INTERNSHIPS

Public Interest Intern <i>Alabama Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama</i>	January 2012-May 2012
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Judicial Intern <i>Chambers of United States Federal District Judge Virginia Hopkins United States District Court for the Northern District of Alabama</i>	July 2011-August 2011
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Summer Intern <i>Office of Counsel, University of Alabama</i>	June 2011-July 2011
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PUBLICATIONS

Articles and Chapters:

Dared to Enter a “Man’s World”: *Mississippi Women Lawyers, 1914-1964*, with Kris Gilliland and Bette Bradley, 85 MISS. L.J. 1479 (2017).

Breakthrough Verdict, in *NEW CORN, NEW FIELDS: ESSAYS IN ALABAMA LEGAL HISTORY* (Paul Pruitt ed., 2015).

Essays, Book Reviews, and Other Shorter Works:

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Contributing Reviewer, *LIVING BLUES MAGAZINE*, Spring 2008.

PRESENTATIONS

Pride Parades in Mississippi: Navigating and Creating Community Archives, at the American Studies Association Annual Meeting, November 2022. (forthcoming)

United Campus Workers 3565 in the Pride Parade: Campus Organizing at the University of Mississippi, 2015-2020, at the Southern Labor Studies Association Conference, September 2022. (forthcoming)

Seeing Queer Joy in Mississippi: an MFA Presentation, Violet Valley Bookstore, July 2022.

Teaching Law and Science Fiction: A Pedagogical Approach to Reconceptualising Law in Times of Uncertainty, (co-presented with Antonia Eliason, at the Socio-Legal Studies Conference, March 2022.

Teaching Law and Science Fiction at the University of Mississippi, (co-presented with Antonia Eliason), at the London Science Fiction Review Conference, September 2021.

"Lawyers Were Nastier:" Depictions of Law, Lawyers, and Justice in Terry Pratchett's Discworld Novels, at The Utopia/Dystopia Project: Speculation, Legal Imagination, Becoming, and Possibilities Conference, Tulane University School of Law, New Orleans, LA, March 2019.

Queer Mississippi, oral history presentation, at Southeastern Women's Studies Association Annual Conference, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS, March 2019.

Tupelo Pride, short documentary film, at Southeastern Women's Studies Association Annual Conference, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS, March 2019.

Promoting Diversity in the Law Library, at Discerning Diverse Voices: Symposium on Diversity, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL, February 2019.

Tupelo Pride, short documentary film, at Discerning Diverse Voices: Symposium on Diversity, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL, February 2019.

Imagining New Futures: Creating Speculative Fiction for Life After Capitalism, with Antonia Eliason, at ClassCrits XI: Rising Together for Economic Hope, Power, & Justice, University of West Virginia School of Law, Morgantown, WV, November 2018.

Teaching Legal Information in the Era of Fake News with Bette Bradley, at the Southeastern American Association of Law Libraries Annual Meeting, March 2018.

Law and Illness in Speculative Fiction: A Survey of Recent Works, at the Mississippi Philological Society Annual Meeting, Mississippi Valley State University, Itta Bena, MS, March 2017.

NAACP v. Alabama: A Case Study in Social Change, at the Law and Society Annual Meeting, New Orleans, LA, March 2016.

“Here Was A Man”: *Southern Bastards and White Southern Hypermasculinity* at the International Comic Arts Forum Conference, University of South Carolina, March 2016.

Unsettlement, short documentary film, with Elizabeth Blair and Abbott Henderson at the Sidewalk Film Festival, Birmingham, AL, September 2013. Won “Best Student Film” award.

Country Music, panel participant, Music of the South Symposium, University of Mississippi, March 2012.

“Daddy Tell Me Another Story”: *The Drive-By Truckers and Southern History*, Center for the Study of Southern Culture Brown Bag Lecture Series, University of Mississippi, March 2006.