The Hollidays in Mississippi: A Documentary Project about Queer Family, Legacy, and Community Struggle

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THE HOLLIDAYS IN MISSISSIPPI: A DOCUMENTARY PROJECT
ABOUT QUEER FAMILY, LEGACY, AND COMMUNITY STRUGGLE

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

by

CHRISTINA ALISON HUFF

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This MFA thesis accompanies a short documentary film encompassing a “passing of the torch” story between Eric White (GoDiva Holliday) and his drag daughter, Justin Tyler (DeePression Holliday.) After twenty years of performing and directing drag shows in Tupelo, MS, White makes the decision to let go of his passion and focus on himself. He ensures that his drag daughter, Holbrook, carries on the legacy of creating LGBTQ spaces in the conservative South. This story will also touch on the familial relationship between the two drag performers who both grew up in small-town Mississippi but in different eras. The work highlights the importance of queer families (or the families we create outside of our biological families) in order to survive and thrive in predominantly conservative towns. I am interested in this work because there is a lack of research and documentation of LGBTQ life in north Mississippi. This is partially due to the theory of metronormativity, or the idea that queer life can only exist and thrive in more prominent urban places such as Atlanta, LA, or New York City. While there is evidence that LGBTQ communities exist on a more extensive basis in these areas, metronormativity is harmful and alienates small and rural LGBTQ communities. By acknowledging that queer spaces exist in rural and small towns (such as Tupelo, MS, which is where my work is focused), we can begin researching and collecting stories from LGBTQ communities that otherwise would not have been listened to.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the queer communities of Mississippi. You are seen, you are heard, and you are loved.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor, Dr. Andy Harper, for all of the help, encouragement, and mentorship he has provided me over the years during this project. I also would like to thank the rest of my committee members, John Rash and Zaire Love for their commitment to the success of this thesis.

I am also grateful to Eric White and Justin Tyler for making this project possible. Their willingness to open themselves up to me and tell their stories is invaluable to the ongoing queer studies in Mississippi.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The importance surrounding documenting the queer American South is becoming a new and emerging concept, with many notable documentary projects such as The Invisible Histories Project, Queens of the South Plains, and Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South. While documentary projects focusing on Southern LGBTQ voices are on the rise, the current lack of documentary work in the South that focuses on queer communities is problematic. Documentary work of all kinds is vital on both the community and individualistic level to express and archive their experiences in a personal storytelling manner. More importantly, documentarians, anthropologists, and sociologists who leave out entire portions of the United States in LGBTQ work are negligent and serve to disengage essential voices from the overall American LGBTQ narrative and experience. Josh Buford, an archivist working with the Invisible Histories Project, states the importance of documenting queer history in the South. He says, "Archiving is resistance. Every time we identify something, we are resisting the notion that we don't exist."¹ This quote serves two purposes: it declares documentary work is a radicalizing experience, whether or not you are the producer of the work or the audience consuming the work. It serves the idea that learning about different ideas, identities, and communities that may or may not be different from your own experiences is vital in understanding the totality of the human race.

Additionally, this quote shows that there is still so much to uncover about the queer South because it is still underresearched.

Only one in ten sociological studies examine LGBTQ life in the Southern region due to biases in sociological research. Moreover, only 15% of LGBTQ research happens in the South compared to 26% in the Northeast and 30% in the West. Places like California, New York, and Florida receive the most attention in LGBTQ research even though 35% of LGBTQ people in the United States live in the South. The underlying idea is that queer life is generalized based on more urban settings throughout the North and West and overlooked in the South.²

While studying for a master’s degree at the University of Mississippi, I was intrigued by the idea that the queer South was under-researched and underutilized as a source of documentary material. I became acutely aware of the fact while taking a class with Dr. Jessica Wilkerson during the fall of 2019, my first semester as a graduate student. We learned how to research oral history methodology during the course, but we were also expected to put that knowledge to use in the field. Dr. Wilkerson split the class into two groups, a Water Valley, Mississippi community-based oral history project and a queer Mississippi oral history project. Individuals could choose which project they wanted to participate in based on their interests. Several other students, including myself, decided we wanted to participate in the queer Mississippi oral history project.

Dr. Wilkerson instructed the queer oral history group to attend a drag show in Tupelo, Mississippi, one Friday night in early October 2019. It was about a forty-five-minute drive outside Oxford, Mississippi, where I was attending school. Going to this event ensured that the class would meet queer Mississippians in the area that might be interested in collaborating on the project.

queer oral history project with us, which would ultimately go into the Invisible Histories Project archive. While I did not meet anyone at that particular drag show for the oral history project, it was the first time I encountered Eric White and Justin Tyler. White and Tyler were two Mississippi drag queens I would later reach out to regarding a project for another class with professor John Rash. During this class, Mr. Rash instructed us to document a community outside of Oxford, Mississippi for a short assignment that would eventually culminate into a much larger project for the end of the semester. I thought the Tupelo, MS drag community would make for an interesting short story, so I contacted a large group of drag queens via Facebook, inquiring about a short collaborative project. Only two people responded to me, Eric White and Justin Tyler. I thought getting to know them and spending a few hours with the two performers would make for a great short community project for John Rash's class. Unbeknownst to me, this would become a much larger, all-encompassing project which would eventually turn into my thesis. These two classes helped merge my thesis work into something much larger than I thought it would be.

This MFA thesis arose from my master's thesis, which I completed in the spring of 2020, titled "Queer Subculture in the Conservative South: A Study of Drag Performers in Mississippi." I interviewed five different drag performers residing in north and central Mississippi in this project and turned those interviews into a multi-modal piece that included three short films, two audio documentaries, photographs, and quotes. Ultimately, this project created a testimonial that described their experiences as queer people living and performing their art in the conservative South. From this master's project, I focused on two characters, Eric White and Justin Tyler, who would later become the main characters in my MFA thesis film titled "The Hollidays in Mississippi."
The Hollidays in Mississippi is a 35-minute short film encompassing a "passing of the torch" story between Eric White (stage name GoDiva Holliday) and his drag child, Justin Tyler (DeePression Holliday). After twenty years of performing and directing shows in Tupelo, Mississippi, White decides to let go of his passion and focus on himself. However, he ensures that his drag child, Tyler, carries on the legacy of creating and maintaining LGBTQ spaces in the conservative South. This story will also touch on the familial relationship between the two drag performers who grew up in small-town Mississippi but in different eras. This film is ultimately a story about the Holliday duo who work together to build and maintain safe spaces for queer people in North Mississippi. The story spans over three years and explores the challenges that Eric White (GoDiva Holliday) and Justin Tyler (DeePression Holliday) \(^3\) face both as drag performers and show producers. Maintaining a queer scene in North Mississippi has been difficult for the Holliday family, especially in light of recent anti-gay legislation and the destruction caused by current worldwide events such as COVID-19. This story captures the frustration and tribulation of the conservative South's lack of support and space for LGBTQ people.

The terms you will see throughout this written thesis and the film that are worth mentioning are drag queen, drag children, drag family, and metronormativity. A drag queen is a person, more often a self-identified man, who dresses in traditionally female clothing (such as dresses, makeup, heels, jewelry, etc.) to perform “female illusion.” These performances are often exaggerated understandings of femininity and are used as a way to challenge gender norms or help one understand their own gender identity. A drag child (or, for this thesis, a drag daughter) is a person who is taught drag by another person, typically by a seasoned drag performer. An

\(^3\) GoDiva Holliday and DeePression Holliday are the performance names and drag persona’s of Eric and Justin. Justin recently changed his drag name to Fendi LaFemme, but I will still use the drag name DeePression Holliday for the sake of this thesis because this is who (s)he was during the timeline of this project.
individual can become a drag child through formal or informal means, but usually, the child requests that they join the drag family, and the two parties agree to work together. This also results in the drag child adopting the drag parent's stage last name.⁴

The drag mother, or the mentor, helps the drag child get on their feet and helps build a solid foundation and understanding of every facet of drag performance. Lastly, another term you will see throughout this written piece is metronormativity. Metronormativity, a term coined by Jack Halberstam, is the idea that a dichotomy exists between urban and rural spaces. Halberstam explains that "the metronormative story of migration from 'country' to 'town' is a spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring a life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy." Essentially, the idea here is that rural queers must move to places of tolerance such as city and urban areas to thrive.⁵

This MFA thesis ultimately adds to the ongoing conversation about small-town Southern queer life through the lens of a documentary film. Because documentary work about queer Southern life is scarce, I hope that this project is simply one more piece to the puzzle in the overall narrative of Southern queer history. The advantage that I found through this project was that, as a queer Southerner, I had an insider perspective of what LGBTQ life is like in small-town Mississippi. Community building with my collaborators made it much more accessible than if I were not part of the community myself. While I did not know any of the main characters in my film before I started the project, I believe that sharing a common identity of Southern queerness helped build trust quicker than if I were a complete outsider to the community. Living in the South for most of my life made me empathetic and understanding of the systematic

disadvantages of LGBTQ life to thrive in conservative Mississippi. Ultimately, I knew that the issues mainly arose from anti-gay legislation. The policies and legislation that are in place in Mississippi are problematic; however, Mississippians are working hard to change these policies, and for people who are outsiders to the South, I suspect that this dichotomy might be complex for some to grasp.

COVID-19 served to be a significant disadvantage for me with this project. The MFA thesis was initially intended to be a three-year project, but COVID-19 disrupted the schedule. I spent the most time in the field collecting footage and documents between October 2019 and March 2020, with a year and a half break due to COVID-19. With the occasional outdoor drag show here and there, I mostly picked back up between July 2021 and September 2021 to finish my interviews and fieldwork. Had I been able to spend more time with Eric White and Justin Tyler, I believe that I would have had much more observational footage to help push the story further than it already is. However, the disadvantage of the COVID-19 outbreak pushed this story in a completely different direction. So, while COVID-19 was a disadvantage for me in terms of doing fieldwork, it was also an advantage in that I was able to turn the story in a way that properly highlighted the LGBTQ community struggle in North Mississippi. COVID-19 allowed me to push the story into a direction that it may not have otherwise gone. To elaborate on this, the interview that I conducted with Eric White in September of 2021 helped outline the story's premise with his reveal that he was retiring from being a drag queen and producing drag shows. White explained that after performing drag for over twenty years, he decided to retire finally. He was frustrated with a combination of Mississippi issues, including anti-LGBTQ legislation and the COVID-19 pandemic making indoor performances unsafe. White confided in me that he had lost his spark to continue booking, directing, and performing at drag shows.
Without the pandemic, Eric White may still be producing and performing drag shows, and this project story may have turned out completely different.

This project and its research are essential because documentary filmmaking asks the audience (as well as the filmmaker) to look at a specific topic from a new perspective. The scope of documentaries extends beyond entertainment to helping academics and researchers learn about different groups of people through an ethnographic lens. Documentarians ultimately open up new possibilities in understanding and analyzing the human experience by documenting a person or a group of people. Queer media has substantially changed throughout the decades in the United States. From the Hays Code banning any storytelling that did not involve the stable, typical Christian family household to documentary-style tabloids that focused on the perverted nature of being queer, LGBTQ stories have recently evolved into stories that queer people dictate through their reflexive storytelling on social media. Documentary filmmaking is not just for entertainment purposes. Documentaries are a way to use filmmaking as an engine for understanding different lives and cultures beyond our own. Since documentary projects provide insight into a social world that the researcher and the viewer may or may not be aware of, the work can be viewed as a research tool. In some ways, documentaries can be viewed through the lens of visual and video ethnography to gain a better understanding of various populations in relation to time and place.

The overall research objectives are to essentially understand and explore the ideas of metronormativity and what that means for small Mississippi towns. The project questions why queer space is harder to build and maintain in small-town Mississippi and if the questions we are asking should consider metronormativity as a reason. The answers to these questions are difficult to answer in simple terms, but I hope that this film at least provides insight into what life is like
for queer people in Northern Mississippi. Additionally, it shows us how queer Mississippians continue to build communities when there are no designated safe spaces for LGBTQ residents. So while this project did not essentially begin with any research aims or research objectives, the crux of the project became apparent as I continued to work with the two main characters in my film and talk with them about their frustration about the lack of queer spaces in Mississippi.

The methodology for this project began with a short, 3-minute observational film about Eric White and Justin Tyler in 2019. After attending several drag shows in the area and collecting footage in the field, I collected two sit-down interviews with White and Tyler. By the end of 2019, I had a short twelve-minute film about their relationship as drag performers. I continued with my fieldwork, following them from show to show and obtaining as much observational footage as possible. In March of 2020, I had to delay my fieldwork due to COVID-19, and I attended just one drag show in November of 2020, which was outdoors. While I did not conduct any interviews or fieldwork during this time, I did stay in touch with the two performers, often talking on the phone and staying in contact. I also started editing the story together during this time. By the summer of 2021, I was back in the field documenting drag shows, and in September 2021, I had my last round of follow-up interviews with Eric White and Justin Tyler. I have spent September 2021 through May 2022 crafting and editing the documentary film that would be known as "The Hollidays in Mississippi."

This written thesis accompanying my documentary film, "The Hollidays in Mississippi," comprises seven chapters. Chapter two will highlight a general overview of the history of drag in the United States. While this thesis is not about the history of drag performers, it is vital to have some background understanding and context of drag performers in the United States. Chapter three will focus on the importance of queer families, or the families "we create" to survive. This
chapter will also include self-made queer space, self-made queer documentarians as part of creating a "virtual" safe space, and the importance of documentary filmmaking in academic spaces to help outside communities learn about different groups of people. The fourth chapter will be a literature review of what other documentarians are creating in terms of LGBTQ stories and how they fit into the overall narrative of LGBTQ culture in both the United States and the Southern portion of the United States. The fifth chapter will focus on my methods, medium, and other research that led me to this project. Some of the research portions will focus on the methodology of having a successful interview and community building. I will also bring my own experiences of being a filmmaker during the era of COVID-19 and how this project personally affected me and my identity as an artist and as a queer Mississippian myself. The last chapter, chapter six, will offer conclusions about how my work continues to push our understanding of LGBTQ spaces in the South.
CHAPTER 2
A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO DRAG

While this project does not attempt a full historical account of drag performance, it is important to understand the trajectory of drag in the United States. This chapter will primarily focus on a broad history of drag in the United States in chronological order, beginning with the first-ever recorded drag queen and ending with the popularity of gay bars and nightlife during the 1990s. It is important to note that the history of drag is a complex and intricate subject.

Female and male impersonators are a universal concept that transcends culture, region, and era. Because the history of drag goes so far back, it is impossible to be confident about when and where drag initially began. Nevertheless, historians know that pantomiming flourished during Emperor Augustus' reign between 27 B.C. and 14 A.D. in Rome, and an enslaved Roman named Livius Andronicus translated and performed ancient Greek drama. Livius acted in Greek plays dressed as a woman because it was inappropriate for women to act on stage during that time. Many examples include Shakespearean boys and men playing women on stage during the late 1500s and early 1600s, and during the height of the 18th century, the "ballad opera" became a popular theatrical event in England that consisted of comedy, music, and spoken dialogue that highlighted absurd plots. This type of entertainment eventually entwined itself with taverns and music halls, where women were also a part of these performances. Women impersonated males and were often referred to as principal boys and dames. One of the most famous acts that women played as men or boys on stage is "Peter Pan," first performed in 1904. Even though Peter Pan's character was written for a boy actor, it was a tradition that a female play that role to
guarantee that the love between Wendy and Peter Pan was unadulterated and free of any sexual tension.⁶

Female impersonation off stage was different from female impersonation on stage, where the blurred lines of gender were safe to explore in the confinements of entertainment. For example, the first-ever recorded American drag queen (who was not confined to the stage) was a Black man named William Dorsey Swann, born into slavery in 1860. Not only was he the first recorded drag queen, but researchers identify him as one of the first queer activists in the United States. Channing Joseph, a journalism student at Columbia University, first discovered this story when he found an old newspaper headline titled "Negro Dive Raided. Thirteen Black Men Dressed as Women Surprised at Supper and Arrested," dated back to April 13, 1888. Channing discovered that William Dorsey Swann was in charge of an entire secret underground world in Washington D.C., where he hosted drag balls. These balls were often held in secret because they were understandably afraid of police raids and imprisonment for their cross-dressing parties. Swann was ultimately arrested in 1896 under a false charge of running a brothel when he held a drag ball in reality. Swann reportedly fought back during the raid but was ultimately sentenced to ten months in jail. Channing Joseph believes this report illustrated the first recorded instances of violent resistance in support of LGBTQ issues. Channing exclaims, "he's taking the first steps that we have documented in resisting authorities' efforts to clamp down on an openly queer group. Because of that, I define him as an activist."⁷

While William Dorsey Swann fought against police raids for the LGBTQ cause, drag, or "female impersonation" as it is better used in this context, looked different in other parts of the

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United States during the mid-nineteenth century. Female impersonation became a way for LGBTQ people to express and explore various issues, but racist white men also used female impersonation to ridicule African American culture, such as singing and dancing styles through theatrical performances and blackface, known as minstrelsy. As minstrel shows expanded in content, male "female impersonation" with exaggerated feminine roles became a popular way for this mockery to continue for the entertainment of all-white audiences.\(^8\) Blackface minstrelsy was a way for post-Civil War antebellum white people to explore and relieve their anxieties about race and gender while also feeling like they had control over the sudden upheaval in the new race relations after emancipation.\(^9\) Minstrel drag contained drama, comedy, and music between the mid-1800s and early 1900s. While it is unclear how drag became a part of minstrelsy, some researchers believe it originated from plantation women referred to as "yaller gals." Minstrel drag was so sophisticated at the time that there were different "types" of drag, such as the "the funny old gal," who were profane and comedic, "femme fatales," who were blackfaced, and "prima donnas" who were exquisite and graceful with their work. In addition, some drag performers were so dedicated to their craft that they had genuine women's clothing such as dresses, pantyhose, undergarments, makeup, perfumes, and hundreds of dollars worth of jewelry.\(^10\)

Eventually, minstrel acts became so popular that vaudeville incorporated them. By the end of the 1800s, female impersonation in vaudeville became a popular form of entertainment that lasted through the Prohibition era. These vaudeville acts included animal tricks, opera singers, acrobats, and circus performances. As the United States grew through the industrialization period, so did entertainment. The natural progression of Americans moving


\(^10\) Moore, 56
from the rural landscape to industrialized cities presented the working class an opportunity in the entertainment industry. Vaudeville provided Americans with many theater types, including dime museums, musical comedy, opera, slapstick comedy, and one of the more popular forms of entertainment, female impersonation. As vaudeville shows became a fashionable source of American entertainment, female impersonation, or drag, became commercialized. The large variety of clothes, shoes, makeup, jewelry, and corsets that female illusionists would wear catered to an audience of women who were interested in learning more about femininity and beauty. In the early 1900s, people were engrossed in the idea that femininity could be played so well by a straight cis man.\textsuperscript{11} Along with vaudeville acts, circus acts during the late 1800s and early 1900s became a popular source of entertainment, where gender blurred the lines and was often embellished and exaggerated. Women became men, and men became women through the androgynous performances of clowns and bearded ladies.\textsuperscript{12}

In the early 1900s, female impersonation provided a way for many to explore gender, racial, and class expectations while also challenging and questioning these constructs as well. For example, places like Harlem in the 1920s were home to numerous LGBTQ artists such as Alain Locke and Langston Hughes, who contributed to the development of Harlem as the country's "homosexual mecca" during the Harlem Renaissance. Because of this, queer Black working-class Harlem citizens were also outspoken about their sexuality. This inevitably made Harlem "the most liberated public space in U.S. history."

\textsuperscript{13} Even outside of Harlem, drag was popular in unexpected ways. For example, female impersonators were cultivated during World War I as part of a Progressive Era reform drive that urged soldiers to entertain one another in

\begin{thebibliography}{13}
\bibitem{Boyd} Boyd, 33-34
\bibitem{Moore} Moore, 123
\bibitem{Russell} Thaddeus Russell. \textit{The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality}. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, pp. 103, 105
\end{thebibliography}
order to divert soldiers' attention away from alcohol, gambling, and prostitution. Having female impersonation entertainment shows kept the soldiers' morale in check. In addition, there was an argument that female impersonation was necessary to keep men "out of trouble" because there were no women in the ranks during World War I. After the war, many ex-soldiers entered vaudeville acts because they suddenly found themselves out of a job when the war ended. A remedy for these unemployed men was to enter the show business and entertain the masses.

World War II was no different. Female impersonation and drag were just as popular in World War I, if not more extravagant. Many soldiers wrote their own musicals and comedies and put on female impersonation shows and routines to keep each other entertained. Even though the army banned homosexuality during the 1940s, closeted gay service members could secretly incorporate costumes and dance to play with gender roles and entertain other closeted gays with coded signals. Without being recognized as homosexual, gay service members were able to act effeminate and obtain physical contact from other males. GI drag gave both straight and gay men a safe place to explore gender and sexuality - whether it was a place for gay men to release their identity safely or a place for straight heterosexual men to reaffirm their masculinity. Overseas, men who wanted to perform as female impersonators only needed to reach out to the USO and Red Cross for support. Because it was important for soldiers to keep up morale and keep each other entertained, they were happy to send men overseas packages filled with dresses, jewelry, and other costume materials in order for the soldiers to hold their own drag and pageant shows. Service members also used shells, leaves, and fruit in their overseas male drag performances enhancing the creativity and resources they had around them.

16 Bérubé, 67 -84
Outside of the army, drag was a popular form of entertainment in the Civilian Conservation Corps (a volunteer-based relief program that targeted unemployed and unmarried young men to enlist in jobs in forests, parks, and public land) from 1933 through 1942. Thousands of American men left their homes to join the Civilian Conservation Corps, which established a new age in how Americans viewed manhood and masculinity. By enrolling in the Emergency Relief Work program contrived by President Roosevelt, many young men learned self-discipline, work ethic, and self-confidence that helped them onto the path of "middle-class masculinity." However, some men experimented with their gender identity by showing up to nightly campfires dressed as women and performing make-shift drag shows for their fellow Civilian Conservation Corps colleagues. Activities such as crossing dressing, wearing makeup, and drag was widespread among the CCC camps. Lastly, while other men preferred to engage in bodybuilding or group sport, the CCC was a place that bred homoerotic activity because of the isolated conditions that the camp preserved. Many of these camps had certain traditions and social norms, and the weekly newspaper, Happy Days, was a way for all of the camps to stay connected. Articles and photographs about drag shows, camp slang, and muscular men filled the camp newspapers. Because of this, appearance and grooming became prominent in CCC culture. For example, the Happy Days newspaper often had contests of who was the best-looking man, and in Wyoming, all-male beauty contests became a common event. In Ohio, some barracks organized themselves into three different groups; the Sissies, the Pansies, and the Farmers. The men were so cleaned up and well organized that some of the women who visited the barracks had jokingly remarked, "what fine wives these boys would make." The Civilian Conservation Corps is just one other example of how gender identity and gender roles blurred the lines for entertainment in unexpected ways.\(^7\)

More importantly, people began to explore social freedom and cross social and gender boundaries throughout the entire world within the realms of the entertainment industry. Many social moralists contested this because they believed that the entertainment sphere, such as the theater, fostered an environment of crime, gambling, and sexual deviancy. With the growth of the entertainment industry, so did the questions and challenges to traditional beliefs about sexuality and gender. Until the 1960s, female impersonators were not classified as a subgroup of "drag queens" (men who identified as gay and dressed as women for theatrical purposes), and they generally rejected any affiliation to America's homosexual subculture. In addition, most gay bars in the United States did not host drag shows, according to Esther Newton's research in the 1960s.

There were many reasons why drag performances were not affiliated with gay bars during this time. By the 1930s, bars and clubs were apprehensive to host female impersonation and drag shows due to the rising suspicions of drag being associated with homosexuality, deviancy, or disorderly conduct. Because there was a possibility of police raids in areas where homosexual activity was prominent, eliminating drag shows from bars and clubs protected bars and bar owners' reputations. Another reason why drag and female impersonation shows were less common in bars during this time period was because of the homophile movement.

To elaborate, LGBTQ history after WWII is identified by two movements: the Mattachine Society founded in 1951, and the Stonewall Riots in 1969. The Mattachine Society began in Los Angeles during the 1950s when a group of homosexuals came together to organize a way to defend their rights as citizens. Fueled by communist ideology, the Mattachine Society (1950-1953) was a radical movement in the politics of homosexuality. However, because of a division within the organization, it dissolved into a second-generation version of the Mattachine Society.

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19 Esther Newton, Mother Camp
Society (1953-1967) which held more conservative views than its predecessor. The Mattachine Society (1953-1967) founded itself on creating a homosexuality organization that revolved around respectability in order to “unify homosexuals as a group and with the dominant culture, to educated both homosexuals and heterosexuals because ‘the total of information available on the subject of homosexuality is woefully meager and utterly inconclusive,’” and to lead forward into the realm of political action.” This was the basis of the homophile movement, where homosexuals banded together to make themselves assimilate to appear “respectable” and deserving of basic human rights like everyone else. Thus, the homophile movement directly opposed drag and female impersonation.

However, during the 1970s, gay and drag bars began to pop up throughout the United States, where amateur female impersonators could try their hand at performing and exploring themselves as drag queens. As a result, female impersonation and drag became closely associated with gay bars, dance halls, balls, and clubs, and heterosexual people would also attend these spaces, which increased the popularity of queer spaces even further. The history of gender role play and gender-switching is incredibly complex since it derives from many places, values, traditions, and cultures. Dedicating only one chapter to the historical side of drag and female impersonation is only a drop in the bucket of what can be explored and understood. This chapter offers a small glimpse into the history of drag throughout the world and the United States. This historical context serves as background to the current lives of drag performers in North Mississippi and how they understand their Southern identities within the space they are navigating through and creating.

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20 Behind the Mask of Respectability: Reconsidering the Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice - Martin Meeker 78-83
21 Michael Moore, 153-155
CHAPTER 3
DRAG AND SOUTHERN IDENTITIES: UNDERSTANDING QUEERNESS IN THE SOUTH ON A HISTORICAL CONTEXT, GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT, AND A COMMUNITY CONTEXT

This chapter will illustrate understanding queerness in the South in several different ways. There will be some historical context in this section and sociological and anthropological research illustrating the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality in Southern space. This chapter will also highlight geographical approaches to gender-bending. Research about how gender-bending and performing drag in the South compared to the Northern or Western portions of the United States is worth mentioning in this thesis. Southern queerness is an interesting concept because there is a myth that queer life cannot exist outside of urban life. While research shows that there are negative biases against LGBTQ communities in the South due to political and religious conservative views. It is crucial to understand that the South comes with many dichotomies where a queer South can exist with Christian fundamentalism and traditionalist familial views. Both a queer South and a conservative South can exist simultaneously. The idea that gay culture is absent in the American South only serves to erase rural and small-town Southern queerness, viability, and survival to elevate predominantly white, urban gay voices. This section will include a summary of John Howard's book *Men Like That*, which will guide the reader through an overview of queer life in the South with supporting texts from authors Daneel Buring and Douglas Ray. This section is by no means a complete overview of the historical

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account of queer life in the South; instead, it is to give the reader a better idea and understanding of several authors' research points and community oral history accounts.

In *Men Like That*, John Howard offers a cluster of oral histories surrounding the themes of queer desire, culture, identity, and politics between 1945 through 1980 in the South, particularly in Mississippi. As an oral historian, Howard focuses on several methodologies to access stories from his participants. Howard uses an array of one-on-one interviews, telephone interviews, newspapers, TV accounts, and trial proceedings to formulate what it is like living in the South as a queer person. Howard employs a "free flowing" method during his interviews, allowing the interviewee to speak lavishly and unconstrained. He even states, "I ask my narrators to simply tell me their life stories, allowing them to place emphasis on what they view as most important while recognizing the narrator's awareness of the very nature of my project tends to encourage a focus on 'gay' phenomena…. I limit my questions so as to avoid scripting their responses." Howard leaves open-ended questions for his subject to interpret at their own will. This method ensures that crossing boundaries are non-existent while allowing the interviewee the freedom to choose how they answer a question at their own comfort level.

Howard presents his oral histories in a fragmented way, interweaving fifty-five or so oral accounts he has collected over five years in his research and analysis. In chapter four, under "Norms and Laws," Howard uses a trial proceeding that spans over eight pages, interlaced with historical text and analysis. Here, the reader can experience a first-hand account of a hate crime committed against a gay man to help the reader understand the political state over homosexuality during the 1950s. Mentioning this is vital because Howard's interview methodology and research have allowed him to undergo a historical account of queer southerners to a unique extent.

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In *Men Like That*, Howard touches on four primary areas of focus: desire, identity, community, and political movements in the South. Howard starts the queer Southern timeline around the 1950s, when the integration of Southern and Mississippi homosexuality had already begun, even though Mississippi was vehemently opposed to homosexuality. During one's youth, however, it was expected for young boys to explore their gender and sexuality. It was not uncommon for many young boys to dress in their mother's or sister's clothing, wear makeup, and put on jewelry, and homosexual experiences among young boys in the rural landscape were common. Specific places and sites also encouraged homosexual relations between friends, neighbors, and distant relatives. For many Mississippians, cramped living conditions were unavoidable, and sharing beds with distant same-sex relatives conjured physical intimacies that often became sexual. Boys also swam in lakes and creeks, which was also a motivator for homosexual play.

Howard does mention however, that as boys got older, queerness and homosexuality were no longer forgiven. Nonetheless, some spaces cultivated a place for queer sex and the manipulation of gender roles. Even though Southern institutions such as the church prove to be somewhat bigoted in terms of homophobic and transphobic mindsets, it is also ironically a principal place for queer sex and parodying gender. To clarify this, both Black and white churches in the Deep South, especially in Mississippi, often had separated congregations for men and women; or men were seated on one side of the sanctuary and women on the opposite side. Men gathering together like this harbored a physical closeness that had the possibility of leading to homoeroticism, and many young boys and men had sexual relations with one another inside of the church. Furthermore, some Black churches dating back to the 1930s held drag shows to raise money for fundraisers. They would even hold "Brideless Weddings," a fake wedding where all moving parts are men, even the "bride." The groom is often the most petite
man in the room, while the bride is the tallest. These homosexual acts, along with manipulating and parodying gender roles in these Southern and conservatively religious spaces, prove that a dichotomy exists between homosexuality and the South.

John Howard also mentions that some bars in the South tolerated homosexuality, and they were frequently (but unofficially) known as queer spaces. Several Southern bars would host safe spaces for LGBTQ activity and community and would even go out of their way to preserve the safety of the bar and the occupants. One example of this was different colored bar lights. Because many bars were under the scrutiny of police raids and inspections, if the bar's lights turned blue, it meant gay people needed to switch dance partners to appear heterosexual. Cars and roads became another safe space for queer activity because they allowed gay men to drive and look for pleasure and partners. Several streets and parking lots during specific hours were known as gay hotspots. Queer history in the South, specifically in rural and small towns, has always existed and been maintained by queer, closeted community members. They created safe spaces where the LGBTQ community could congregate and meet up. The rural and small-town South played a significant role in creating space for homosexual activity where it was otherwise unlawful.25

Shifting this discussion over to Memphis, which is a more urban area but still heavily set in the conservative South, Daneel Buring's book *Lesbain and Gay Memphis: Building Communities Behind the Magnolia Curtain* is a text that follows the transformation of gay and lesbian culture in Memphis between the years of the 1940s through the 1980s. Buring sections off this text with a portion about gay men living in Memphis, Tennessee between 1950 through 1990, and a section on lesbian women living in Memphis, Tennessee between the years of 1940 and 1990s. The text focuses heavily on community and community-building themes among the

25 Howard, xi-115
LGBTQ citizens of Memphis, Tennessee. Buring emphasizes the importance of looking at queer spaces within the South and Black gay and Black lesbians in the South because they are underrepresented when it comes to looking at queer history. Buring illustrates the difficulties of building and maintaining queer space in Memphis over many decades and the increasing difficulties for Black LGBTQ community members.

Buring begins the text with an overview of how there were no gay bars in Memphis until the mid-1960s, and before then, many queer community members patronized straight bars and mixed bars. Lesbians often danced with each other in these small "mom and pop" bars and even danced with straight women looking for a good dance partner. Lesbians who were able to frequent these mixed bars resulted in an unintentional safe space for lesbians to congregate and create community with one another. While no specific societies or organizations were directed explicitly toward gay communities, many LGBTQ created and built their own communities in unique ways. For example, many lesbian women built community through the softball field. Both softball players and audiences could expect to meet other queer women at these venues. This was more common with white lesbians than Black lesbians, though some Black queer women were involved with predominantly white queer spaces. The invisibility of Black queer women due to racism, heterosexual oppression, and rejection made it increasingly difficult for Black lesbians to create and maintain their own structure of Southern LGBTQ spaces. Because Black queer women experience oppression in significantly different ways than white queer women and men, depending on other support systems in place was crucial to their survival. Black lesbians were essentially invisible and isolated in Memphis during the 1970s and 1980s, which resulted in a lack of large Black lesbian communities. Many Black lesbians in Burings text described that they depended on white lesbian communities such as softball fields or bars known as unofficial lesbian institutions to fit into the lesbian community.

26 A mixed bar is a bar where the predominant customers are straight, but gay and lesbian people are welcome.
Because this book is an oral history text (interwoven with some cultural and historical analysis), Buring suggests that it is essential to take spatial, institutional, and imagined space into account while talking about Memphis as a space for queer studies. Buring employs ethnography and ethnohistory together with queer oral histories to explore topics such as gay bars, softball fields, AIDS organizations, and the importance of community building to help the reader understand queer Southern complexities. Texts that focus more on oral histories are essential for studying the queer South because many historians (or past historians) have not documented queer communities, especially in the context of the South. Because the Southern queer narrative is predominantly understudied, oral histories are a way for historians to fill in the gaps.

Intersectionality is vital in understanding the experiences of all queer communities, especially queer Black communities in the conservative South. According to sociologist and anthropologist Clare F. Walsh, Black lesbians have uniquely different experiences than Black straight men or white queer women. For many Black LGBTQ women, choosing between their sexual orientations or identifying as a member of their racial group can be challenging. The overarching stereotypes of white urban gays living on the West coast dominate society’s expectations of what queer people look like. For Black queer women and lesbians living in the South, this goes directly against the prototype of what LGBTQ communities "should look like," making acceptance harder for queer Black women.

A quote from psychologist Beverly Greene states: “the very act of defining the experiences of all lesbians and gay men by the characteristics of the most privelaged and powerful members of that group [White, European, American] is an oppressive act.” This quote is important because by undermining Black or other WOC voices

and prioritizing affluent White gay men, you provide the idea that the queer experience is monolithic rather than complex.

Understanding how geography and space relate to race in the Southern LGTBQ community is essential in grasping the queer Southern narrative. In Latoya E. Eaves article "Black Geographic Possibilities: On A Queer Black South," Eaves recognizes that the queer (in gender, race, and sexuality) narrative changes in Black southern geographies, which widely shapes the Black community and the notion of a sense of place. She writes, "queer Black geographical work is connected to, but to an extent deviates from, the disciplinary movements of producing queer geographies and sexuality space literatures." In her research, Eaves found that the LGBTQ community, regardless of geographical location, segregates themselves based on class status, gender, ethnicity, and race. Many of these factors are contingent on available public spaces and home life in the queer community.30 In order to understand queer Black people living in the South, we also need to analyze how queer Black space is different from queer white spaces, especially in the South, where rural queers are the minority in LGBTQ research. While this thesis does not analyze queer space between regions and how it differentiates, and how white queer space is vastly different from Black queer space, it is important to note that queerness does not belong to any one identity or place.

Understanding that place and geographies on a larger scale affect both LGBTQ cultures and subcultures is vital to the work I am doing, so I want to bring in sociological studies to help contextualize some of these ideas. To reiterate Carter and Bosch's article, "Assessing the Effects of Urbanism and Regionalism on Gender Role Attitudes, 1974-1998," the South poses a demanding cultural environment for any person undertaking a mission in which they are not

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conforming to mainstream ideas about gender roles and sexuality. Consequently, anything that deviates from the "norm" could challenge the social order.  

Rejection and isolation from communities and families are a possibility as a result. This fear of rejection forces queer Southerners to experiment, find support and embrace their gender identities and sexualities in different ways. Drag is an LGBTQ subculture that makes exploring queer identities safe. This is a way for queer Southerners to experiment with their identities safely without the fear of familial and societal ostracization.

Ashley A. Baker and Kimberly Kelly conducted 27 interviews with queer Southerners to better understand the implications of performing drag in the South versus in the West or the North. Based on their interviews and research, Baker and Kelly found that drag queens, or men who impersonate women through various performances, start experimenting with drag after questioning their queer identities as children and young adults. On the other hand, women who do drag, also known as drag kings, discover that they start to find their queer identity after performing. Southern drag kings use drag to explore their gender identity and sexuality rather than a political or a feminist statement, which is more common in the North and the West than in the South. Most of the time, drag in the South becomes a way to explore gender identity and sexuality without fear of judgment and community ostracization.

Beyond queer subcultures such as drag and community building, queer Southern artists have taken it upon themselves to create and uplift their own voices despite the rejection of the South within their communities. Southern artists continually create art to control the narrative of who they are and what it is like to be queer in the South. One poem by David Eye emphasizes

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31 Scott and Borch, 560
how the Southern rural space accentuates his queer identity and allows him the freedom to be unapologetically himself. It reads,

Cicadas in the trees, shrieking Heat! since morning, have crossed-faded to crickets. Frogs and toads chirp,

thrum, more insistent with the coming darkness.
Two boys, 16 and 20, clothes puddled in dew-wet grass,
sprint off the dock and leap to the moon just cresting the pines across the pond. Pale light coats their skin

as over and over they launch, plunging through silver into the black water. They pull their feet from edge-muck

with every round, slap mudprints onto weathered planks.

Quiet now, they cling to a float, chins on crossed forearms, bodies and legs dangling, like a giant man-o’-war. The pond

licks at shoulders, armpits. Crickets trill, and one hand slips off, grazing the younger boy’s chest, lower. His stomach

thrills, his jaw trembles, limbs slide and entwine. One hand each goes far as its reach, the other hanging on to the raft.

The younger boy lets go, slides down the other’s torso, luminous in the teeming water, and takes in something new.

The only sound the pounding in his ears. Until he has to breathe, and when he emerges, anointed in moonlight,

the older boy laughs at his eagerness. The younger too, at his luck, in his relief. They kiss then. On their lips, the pond, the moon.34

Being able to connect experiences across cultures and geographies stresses that LGBTQ experiences are vastly different from one another. As researchers, historians, and learners, listening to and documenting queer people's life accounts and experiences is essential. As discussed earlier, sociologists, anthropologists, and other academics tend to understudy Southern

34 Douglas Ray. The Queer South. Sibling Rivalry Press, LLC, 2014, pp. 84
queer life because of the harmful ideas of metronormativity. There is an underlying idea that Southern LGBTQ people should move to larger cities and urban places to "thrive" even though these spaces are still contingent on what kind of "queer" you present. Discovering that Southern queer communities are just as viable and prominent as urban queer communities can help us remove the negative stigma of existing as an LGBTQ Southerner and change the narrative in how we understand and contextualize place and queerness as a whole.
CHAPTER 4
THE IMPORTANCE OF DOCUMENTARY WORK

This chapter\(^{35}\) will cover the importance of documentary work (and, more specifically, documentary filmmaking) in the queer media. Documentary filmmaking asks the audience (as well as the filmmaker) to look at a particular topic from a new perspective. While documentary films are primarily intended for entertainment, they provide opportunities for researchers and academics to understand different groups of people from an ethnographic approach. Documentarians ultimately open up new possibilities in understanding and analyzing the human experience by telling stories about people.\(^{36}\) Queer media has substantially changed throughout the decades in the United States. From the Hays Code banning any storytelling that did not involve the stable, typical Christian family household\(^{37}\) to documentary-style tabloids that focused on the perverted nature of being queer,\(^{38}\) LGBTQ stories have recently begun to evolve into stories that queer people dictate through their own reflexive storytelling on social media.\(^{39}\)

Documentaries are a way to use filmmaking as an engine for understanding different lives and cultures beyond our own. As possible tools for research, documentaries connect both the documentarian and the viewer into a social world they may or may not be aware of through the lens of visual and video ethnography. During the 1980s, anthropologists accepted video as a

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\(^{35}\) This chapter was initially written for a seminar during the fall of 2021


process for objectively recording groups of people and their behaviors strictly for research. Researchers were interested in this method because they believed that the camera picked up on information that observers missed in the field. Thus, they essentially could playback old footage and analyze it. Understanding data and qualitative research through video proved to be multifaceted. For example, researchers also had a video to pair with ethnographies instead of relying on audio recordings or writing. However, because this type of work is more collaborative due to many moving parts, there are criticisms about the possibility of manipulating data. By narrowing down a particular idea or question to create a story through the creative editing process, the documentarian ultimately decides the most important part of the data. Even though the processes are mildly different, Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki critique the editing process through digital oral history work. Sheftel and Zembrzycki warn that digital oral history work is different from analog oral history work. They argue that it is easy to see the product through various process steps such as editing, indexing, curating, and manipulation to present the oral history project rather than recording and preserving stories. Interpreting the material through a more comprehensive process may set the researcher up for missing essential parts of the story. By sifting through quotes in interviews and tagging them as necessary, oral historians and other researchers risk not listening to the entire narrative. Instead, people will focus on the parts of the oral history they deem essential, running the risk of creating an entirely subjective piece rather than an objective one. Even though oral history work and documentary filmmaking are on different parts of the documentary spectrum, the idea of sifting through material and editing the

40 Pink, Sarah.
42 According to oralhistory.org, “Oral history in the digital age connects you to the latest information on digital technologies pertaining to all phases of the oral history process.”
story is the same. However, while it immerses the viewer in a completely different world, documentary storytelling runs the risk of not telling the whole story or telling a story that only the documentarian thinks is important.

While these concerns are valid, they still do not take away from using documentary work as a research method in academia. The more we collectively add to our understanding of the world, the more we fill in the gaps in our history. When an audience is watching a documentary, it is important to be reflexive and ask, "Why was this story important enough to tell? What is the documentarian trying to do here, and what are they trying to challenge us with?" This train of thought illustrates that documentary storytelling is a subjective experience. We can further recognize that not all of the materials gathered in fieldwork will be in the final product. With these ideas in mind, the viewer can recognize that documentary filmmaking is a complicated process where the story reveals itself throughout many steps of the different documentary phases. It prompts the viewer to remember that real life is not limited to what we see on screen.

Documentary work, especially documentary cinema, is in constant conversation with what continues beyond our screens.44

Queer visibility in the media operates as a vehicle for pushing those ideas of the overall human experience. In addition, it creates a new atmosphere of understanding LGTBQ identity, generating political engagement by challenging the dominant, heteronormative culture.45 It also allows up-and-coming queer youth to move out of the sphere of invisibility.46 Queer visibility in the media, especially in documentary and reflexive storytelling, is vital because it allows LGBTQ people to dictate and narrate their own stories in portraying queer people. In the past,

negative and outrageous stereotypes embodied queer people in the media. Creating spaces where LGBTQ people can document themselves accurately forces people to reengage with queer material to create joyous experiences rather than harmful ones. For example, the Production Code Administration (or the Hays Code) was the product of an industry heavily influenced by the Catholic church to enforce censorship on profanity, nudity, drug trafficking, sexual relations, and violence. Between 1934 through 1968, the Catholic church ordered Hollywood to abide by "morally correct" films and remove any "immoral" films from circulation. The church believed that Hollywood was solely at fault for rising divorce rates, juvenile deviance, and young men and women mocking traditional values and ideas. As a result, the Catholic church believed that films should only send messages to audiences that reinforced religion, favored a stable home and family life, and the respect for law and law enforcement. Because of these codes, the PCA blocked any scripts or films coming in for review that had political or social commentary.

Even though the Hays Code officially ended in 1968, it still reinforced how people produced and consumed media with heavy political and social themes. Furthermore, queer stories were scarce in the media until the early 1950s, when LGBTQ representation was only through documentaries. However, these documentaries were still harmful, as they often portrayed queer people as dangerous. One example is a show titled Confidential File that aired episodes called "Homosexuals and the Problems They Present" (1954, KTTV) and "Homosexuals Who Stalk and Molest Children" (1955, KTTV). Further, false queer representation also existed in narrative films that portrayed LGBTQ people as immoral, sinful, and diabolical. One example of this is the 1940 adaptation of Rebecca, a thriller novel by Daphne Du Maurier that contains lesbian themes. In the film, the protagonist, Mrs. de Winter, is abused.

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48 Black, Gregory D.
and tortured by the lesbian antagonist, Mrs. Danvers, obsessed with her previous relationship with a dead woman, is revealed through disturbing scenes. Many examples of the "evil lesbian" and the "perverted gay man" tropes that aired on television and in the theaters during the early days of cinema and other forms of media. It was not until the late 80s and early 90s that queer media changed through the New Queer Cinema Movement.49

LGBTQ people need to dictate queer films and queer media because of these harmful tropes. Having the autonomy to tell their own stories of queer experiences and relationships is essential in understanding the larger narrative of LGBTQ life. Unfortunately, many people who are not part of these communities are in charge of how these stories play out. The result is a strong potential for harmful stereotypes about certain groups of people to surface and harm queer communities both passively and actively. Because of this, dangers against the queer community are still prevalent. Oppression, violence, and household abuse are still common for queer adults and youth. However, telling queer stories, no matter the consequences, challenges LGBTQ oppression. The continuation of stories about the LGBTQ community fights against intimidation and carnage from those who seek to silence queer voices.50

Because many queer stories are stifled and dictated by the outside community, the queer community can assert their autonomy over the stories they choose to tell online such as YouTube, meaning there is a place where LGBTQ communities can come out publically, on their own terms, without the control of an outside party. “Coming out videos” has become an increasingly popular genre on YouTube mainly because these videos are a social process that connects the private sphere with the social and public sphere. By coming out on social media, one opens themselves up to criticism, bullying, and other acts of violence and intimidation.

49 McNicholas Smith, Kate
50 Pullen, Christopher.
However, it also opens them up to connection and friendship building, support, and a sense of community and belonging that they may not have been able to experience in their home lives. On a smaller scale, while coming out videos for LGBTQ people may be therapeutic and a way to claim their identity, they also act as a more extensive conversation for societies and cultures that are both heteronormative and dominant. Coming out, in general, becomes political due to the ongoing oppression and violence queer people face daily. By using social media platforms as a method to come out, one can reclaim their identity and autonomy and add to the overall collective of other coming out stories. These stories ultimately become a driving force for conversations on a much larger scale where people start to destigmatize what it means to be queer. More importantly, coming out becomes political due to the ongoing oppression and violence queer people face daily.

While this method is not necessarily documentary filmmaking itself, it is still a reflexive mode of storytelling that will most likely stay in the archives of YouTube forever (or until the platform changes or accounts get deleted.) The definition of what makes something a documentary is constantly changing. Because most people have access to phones that now shoot in 4k or cameras embedded in our laptops, we have all become self-served documentarians, even if we are only documenting our own day-to-day lives.

Even though the way we tell stories is changing, there tends to be a linear path in how people tell their coming-out stories. Coming out stories often involve "acts of remembering," which forces the participant to create the coming out story in a way that follows a linear and coherent narrative. For example, many people who use YouTube as a place for reflexive storytelling for their own coming out stories use the line "I always knew I was a lesbian" or "I

51 Ridder, Sander De, and Frederik Dhaenens.
always knew I was trans ever since I was a child." This ultimately creates an LGBTQ identity that becomes performative for an audience that may or may not understand the queer experience and can further complicate how we tell our life stories.\textsuperscript{52} This audience expectation of an undeviated, straight-to-the-point mode of storytelling is problematic for queer people whose identities are in flux. One way documentarians can push back on this idea is through more abstract and poetic modes of storytelling, which I will discuss in chapter five.

Documentary storytelling, whether it is through filmmaking, photographs, or oral histories, serves as a way to diversify our own ideas and understandings about the world, whether that be through an ethnographic approach to studying social groups or watching a film about a subject or a topic that is unknown to the audience. In addition, queer minorities struggling with finding a community can use the media to connect with other LGBTQ people, whether through watching coming out stories on YouTube or watching documentary films or cinema about LGBTQ topics. In short, documentary work is the main consumerist thread that connects all of us in our day-to-day lives.

\textsuperscript{52} Ridder, Sander De, and Frederik Dhaenens.
CHAPTER 5
QUEER DOCUMENTARY PROJECTS (REVIEW)

As a documentarian, I am always looking for different modes and methods of storytelling in different communities. This chapter will explore some of the various documentary projects and oral histories that fit into the larger narrative of LGBTQ storytelling and documentation. For this chapter, I mainly want to focus on stories that position themselves in the Southern parts of the United States. I am also interested in looking at how my work compares and what my work brings to the table in relation to these other projects.

I am also interested in the many styles of LGBTQ storytelling because I believe there are many expectations for gay people to come out in a very objective, linear fashion. For example, many coming out stories online (such as YouTube) are recorded in a way that is based on chronological points in their life. They start with what age they realized they were gay, how they realized they were gay, how they came out, and how they are now navigating their spaces as a queer person. For LGBT people whose identities are in flux, this expectation of a straight-to-the-point manner of coming out stories is problematic.\(^5\) Having more abstract and poetic ways of storytelling is one way documentarians can push back on this paradigm.

I want to begin with *The Queen* (1968), a documentary by Frank Simon. While it is not a Southern story, it does represent a distinct manner of storytelling that has influenced the way I work. The film "The Queen" is set in New York City and is about the Miss All-American Camp

Beauty Pageant. Simon covers the unusual behind-the-scenes of drag, including applying makeup, picking costumes, selecting jewelry, rehearsing for events, and the drama amongst participants. This documentary is observational because there are no interviews between the director and the contestants. This style is captivating because it encompasses a fly on the wall, an observational method that allows the viewer to experience the drag world from a different perspective.

The film begins with a female impersonator named Jack (stage name Sabrina) and his protégé Richard (stage name Harlow) putting on makeup to prepare for a show, along with some voiceovers briefly explaining the pageant. As the film progresses, the filmmaker broadens the piece into different scenes of twenty other queens rehearsing and getting ready for the New York City pageant. Simon focuses on the aesthetics of the drag queens practicing for the Miss All-American Camp Beauty Pageant, a perspective that most people do not witness.

Throughout the documentary, drag queens explore themes such as sexuality, gender identity, transitioning, and their coming out experiences with families. These conversations served as a framework to legitimize and demythologize the LGBTQ community during a time when homosexuality was outlawed in the United States. It was unlawful to engage in homosexual acts, and so the fact that Frank Simon created this film during this time period speaks to Simon as a filmmaker. Winning the trust and confidence of these drag queens was critical in safely and responsibly portraying this narrative. Finally, Simon's decision to let the tale flow naturally by observing and not intervening with the drag queens allowed the characters to have their own autonomy and be comfortable in their own environment without the filmmakers intruding in their natural space.
"The Queen" was the first documentary film I watched that was almost purely observational. This piqued my interest and curiosity because it highlights the various ways and freedoms we choose to tell our stories. In some ways, this film is a collection of moving photos. They are poetic pictures, not accounts of the life of the performers. This type of storytelling was something I wanted to undertake in the field, as well as gathering personal histories about my subjects' life. In order to tell a whole story, I wanted to combine these two concepts of storytelling into one. It is critical for a documentary filmmaker to "show, not tell," which is why I believe Frank Simon was successful in this film. More importantly, Simon's film encouraged me to step back from my subjects and record the quieter aspects of their surroundings. While anyone can pay to see a drag show, not everyone has the opportunity to peek behind the curtain and see the traditions and practices of restricted LGBTQ spaces. The filmmaker can highlight interesting paradigms, relationships, and conversations that would otherwise go unnoticed or unstudied by having the opportunity to use a camera in this way. In some ways, this form of fly-on-the-wall documentary work is comparable to an ethnographic study. Allowing situations to unfold naturally without interruption allows us to have a closer and more honest look at a specific group of people.

Katy Ballard's dissertation "Queens of the South Plains: Collected Oral Histories of Drag Queens Living in Lubbock, TX" is another piece I would like to highlight. Ballard notes in her dissertation abstract that she chose this project because there is a scarcity of drag queen research and study in non-metropolitan and rural locations. She adds that there are minimal oral history and other collected accounts on drag queens in rural places at the time she published her dissertation in 2013. For her dissertation, Ballard conducted five face-to-face audio interviews with drag queens in Lubbock, TX. Alongside the five drag queen interviews, Ballard also
conducts supplemental interviews with people involved in the drag queen's lives so she can gain a larger perspective of drag culture in a small-town setting. Ballard emphasizes the LGBTQ community in Lubbock, TX, because, similarly to my own sentiments, she finds it crucial to demythologize the idea that small-town and rural places cannot have queer space. In the five oral histories, Ballard covered a comprehensive arrangement of ideas and topics, such as coming out, growing up, hometown experiences, drag experiences and families, creating drag personas, and retirement.  

Ballard focuses not only on drag queen performances, drag personas, and the art behind drag but also on their personal lives as they navigate their queerness in this small, non-metropolitan Southern community. I also made this a point in my own work because I conducted all of my interviews between the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2021 using an oral history approach. While I could have talked to my interviewees about drag exclusively, I made sure to obtain a comprehensive historical perspective of each of their lives to begin to understand and connect small-town gay life experiences in Mississippi. I was able to form critical relationships with my subjects, notably Eric White and Justin Tyler, due to being able to connect with them on a personal level. This allowed me to go deeper into their personal lives, feelings, views, and beliefs regarding queer life in North Mississippi. As a result, I was able to create a deep and honest documentary about the LGBTQ community's hardships in Mississippi for my MFA thesis documentary.

*Out in the South*, by Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Leste Law, is a fascinating and comprehensive book on rural Southern queers who establish places and communities despite the persistent myth of a lack of LGBTQ support in the South. This collection of essays mixes

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historical analysis, identity, and the complications of racism and intersectionality. This book also includes interviews with queer Southerners, giving the reader a comprehensive picture of the particular experiences that LGBTQ populations have had in certain southern settings.

*Out in the South* incorporates an interview from Joseph Beam's 1986 collection *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology, Emmett's Story: Russell County Alabama* to distinguish the unique challenges that gay black men face in the South. Beam writes in the “Philadelphia Gay News” in 1984, "Black gay history, not recounted by white gay media, compounds and extends our invisibility. Transmitting our stories by word of mouth does not possess archival permanence. Survival is visibility." In this interview, Beam asks Emmett about the queer social network connections in Alabama, how gay men are identified in this region, caring for his daughter, sexuality, the complexity of relationships, and the decision to stay in Alabama. Even though this conversation was only a few pages long and did not go into great detail about Emmett's LGBT life in Alabama, it is nonetheless relevant because it adds to the continuous story of everyday queer life and experience in the South.

*Out in the South* draws on the experiences of lesbian and gay people living in the Appalachian mountains from a 1995 essay by Kate Black and Marc A. Roher about growing up gay in the Appalachian foothills. Black and Rhorer met with four gay men and five lesbians from East Kentucky, West Virginia, East Tennessee, and Western North Carolina between the ages of twenty and forty-five. Feelings of loneliness were a common issue in all of the conversations the researchers had with their subjects. Queer people living in the Appalachian mountains felt so isolated from the outside world that a few of them did not even know queer people existed.

Because LGBTQ people felt like they had no support or guidance, they had to learn and cope with isolation. One person named Brent stated, "to be gay in Clay City [Kentucky], it's hard. But it is harder out in the county where there isn't access to cable TV. MTV is preaching 'Free Your Mind' but your mind is not going to be free if you don't live outside the city limits." Those feelings of isolation disappeared when Appalachian queers moved to the city. One participant named Donald expressed the idea of rural visibility and urban anonymity. He explained that being gay in the city held less weight and consequences than being gay in rural spaces. However, this does not mean that rural gays wanted their history and identity to disappear outright. Even though they felt isolated in the mountains, some of them were still attached to their rural, Southern identity. Some participants, however, felt disconnected from their Appalachian identity and readily embraced their new city life.\textsuperscript{56} This is important because it highlights the complexities of identity, place, and community. \textit{Out in the South} is a crucial text for learning about LGBTQ Southern rural and city life. Every interview, essay, and historical record contributes to a better understanding of the South's complexity.

The Digital Transgender Archive is another vital effort that helps select and archive LGBTQ narratives. Photographs, journals, newspapers, posters, speeches, books, and oral histories are among the many resources included in this project. These oral histories include a wide range of issues, including coming out stories, violence, HIV/AIDS, sexuality, activism, drag, arrests, and sex work, all of which have the common thread of transgender experiences. This initiative has so far collected, transcribed, and stored over 450 oral histories. This archive accomplishes a number of significant goals. A project of this kind is necessary because people conducting research (or simply browsing for stories) may filter through a wide range of themes

and genres. This serves to emphasize that the LGBTQ experience is not one-size-fits-all. Rather, it changes depending on various circumstances like religion, environment, family life, school, and many more. Moreover, a project with this scope and accessibility is critical in bridging the gap between LGBTQ youth who may lack a supportive community. Queer adolescents can read and hear experiences from persons who have gone through or are going through some of the same experiences they are going through with projects like the Digital Transgender Archive. Finally, by contributing a diverse group of experiences to a much larger archive of LGBTQ history, the media continues to deconstruct heteronormative culture and introduce new and diverse stories into a new storytelling mode.57

While this chapter does not cover every project on LGBTQ life and subculture, I chose these sources because they provided distinct queer Southern viewpoints and representation. Many excellent projects show the complexity of queer existence, and those intricacies become more evident as you look at different parts of the country. Because the South is a complicated region with no single monolithic experience, tools like these are essential for better understanding and drawing out key themes and ideas of issues in different areas.

Apart from the Queer Mississippi Oral History Project, which began in 2018, LGBTQ documentation in Mississippi is lacking. Before I started working with Eric and Justin in 2019, I did some preliminary research and discovered that there was very little documentary work about Mississippi LGBT life, which piqued my interest in the projects I was working on. The Hollidays in Mississippi, my MFA thesis film, offers a different viewpoint on North Mississippi LGBT life and community struggle through the eyes of two performers. Working on this project for three

years provided me with a unique perspective and insight into the personal struggles and battles that are taking place in my own backyard that I was previously unaware of. This shows that this history will eventually be erased by not being involved in our communities and collecting these stories. Documentary storytelling, whether in film, photography or oral history, allows us to broaden our perspectives and understandings of the world. Queer minorities who are also looking for a community might use the media to connect with other LGBTQ individuals, whether by viewing coming-out stories on YouTube or watching documentaries or movies about LGBTQ issues. In a nutshell, documentary work is the primary consumerist thread that binds us together in our daily lives.
CHAPTER 6
METHODS AND PROCESS

This project began in October of 2019 and slowly expanded over the course of my three years as a graduate student at the University of Mississippi. This chapter updates my work on my approaches to my master's thesis work, "Queer Subculture in the Conservative South: A Study of Drag Performers in Mississippi," which I wrote as a Master's student in 2021. It will also include my strategy and methods for this current MFA thesis, encompassing my complete three-year project experience. My Master’s thesis functioned as a springboard for the MFA thesis and film, so the work's timeline all converges into one three-year production.

Section I. Relationship, Community Building and Project Timeline

I took a Southern Studies oral history course with Dr. Jessica Wilkerson in the fall of 2019, where we learned how to conduct oral histories as a documentary method. I also enrolled in a documentary fieldwork class with professor John Rash where the main project was to document a community in order to produce a short documentary of 10-15 minutes. These two classes incubated the project which became both my master's and MFA thesis work at the University of Mississippi.

Dr. Jessica Wilkerson required the class to attend a drag show in Tupelo, Mississippi, in October 2019 to become familiarized with the queer Mississippi community and recruit people to become collaborators in our queer oral history project. I also used this as an opportunity to
meet people from other communities to complete a semester project for John Rash's fieldwork class. After the drag show, I messaged a classmate named Kevin Cozart in an attempt to find a group of people to work with for my fieldwork class with professor Rash. I inquired if he had any contact information for the drag queens who had performed the night before. I explained to Kevin that I was interested in doing a short documentary on the drag queen scene in Tupelo, Mississippi, and was looking for potential collaborators for this project. He responded immediately with a group chat of about fifteen drag performers and event organizers in a Facebook group message. Eric White and Justin Tyler, two north Mississippi-based drag queens, were the only two who responded. Eric and Justin invited me to Tupelo that following weekend, as they were dressing in drag to go to a fundraiser in Memphis, Tennessee. The three of us decided that I could come to the Link Centre in Tupelo, Mississippi, on Saturday, October 19, 2019.

It was a cold and cloudy Saturday afternoon, but I was nonetheless grateful to have an opportunity to spend some time with these two Mississippi-based drag queens. Even though I brought my camera equipment, and we had fully discussed the intentions behind my use of the camera, I was not entirely sure that I would use it during our first meeting. Treading lightly with a new community and group of people I am working with is vital for trust-building, and I wanted them to get to know me and ask me questions before I took out my camera.

While I was preparing my camera to get ready to record some footage, I engaged Eric and Justin in some small talk. Small talk is hard for me, but I find it necessary to make conversations with the people I am working with so they do not feel intimidated or nervous by my presence. Making small talk can help people feel more at ease and make the situation feel more relaxed, even though it can be a distraction for me. As a filmmaker in a new space and
community, I am navigating new areas, new people, and new attitudes while also ensuring that all of my equipment is functioning correctly. I am used to relying heavily on silently participating behind the camera, so playing both roles proves to be challenging at times. While Eric was excited to show me different parts of his studio and where he gets ready for his drag shows, Justin was on the floor in front of a mirror. Justin was more reserved and quiet compared to Eric, but he quickly came out of his shell the more time I spent with him.

Before I turned on my camera, I got permission to record them. Finally recording, it was easier for me to get into my routine of observing through the camera, and the two of them quickly went back to what they were doing, like putting on makeup, chatting with each other, and singing to Kelly Clarkson. Because they were listening to music, I assumed that any sound I recorded would be unusable due to copyright laws, so I turned off my microphone and returned it to my equipment box. Because I did not expect to use any audio that day, I relied only on the camera audio. I realized this mistake a few months into my first semester of graduate school. Other than the initial mistaken belief that I could not use the audio, I had no real reason to remove the shotgun microphone from the camera. I only did this a few times because I thought I was solely filming b-roll to put over talking-head interviews. I did not realize until I was editing that I desperately wanted to use specific sound bytes that were largely inaccessible due to the lack of a microphone. Again, I assumed the audio would be unusable because copyrighted material and music were in the scene. However, I did not realize that there were times when the music was turned off, in between songs, or too far away to hear, and there were conversations or other details I wished I could have recorded with good audio. Fortunately, I understood early on in my approach that removing equipment was unnecessary. I started reinstalling the shotgun mic on the camera, figuring that I would figure out a way to work around it if I had useless audio.
What I could not work around was unusable audio because I simply was not utilizing my equipment correctly.

After spending the entire afternoon with Justin and Eric in extremely cramped close quarters (which I believe helped push our relationship closer), I thanked them as we went our separate ways. Then, I got into my car and wrote down what my experience was like, a habit I quickly learned to do after all of my fieldwork trips. I wrote down details such as whom I was interviewing, where I was interviewing them, how long those interviews lasted, and the equipment I used. I even wrote down minor details such as their clothing, mood, and general environment, which helped me piece together my journey in the long run as a documentary filmmaker. Writing my field notes helps me as an artist to understand and reflect on different portions of a project that I am working on. After I wrote my fieldnotes and went home, I immediately put all my footage on my computer and backed those files up to another hard drive. I immediately began editing the project because I was eager to see what kind of footage I had. Even though I did not utilize the shotgun mic during my first initial visit with Eric and Justin, I could still collect some footage that contributed to my first project, Put On Your Face (2019). Additionally, because I did not use any "good" audio (i.e., I only used camera audio and not mic audio), I was forced to make do with what I had rather than what I did not. This gave me the freedom to be more imaginative and experimental with my piece about Justin and Eric as drag queens. This piece became a short observational film of under five minutes that showcased the true behind-the-scenes nature of being a drag performer. While this project was both a filming and editing exercise for me, I also utilized it as a gift for them, which I believe ultimately sparked our working relationship and friendship. As a graduate student, I discovered early on that giving back to the communities you work with is critical to avoid coming across as a leech.
Making this piece for them, no matter how tiny, demonstrated that I cared about them as individuals and community members. It was also essential to demonstrate that this was a working relationship that I was willing to put time and effort into.

After I cut together *Put On Your Face* (2019), I forwarded the project to them on Facebook Messenger, and I used this as a tool to see whether or not I was going to continue forward in our working relationship as project collaborators. If they were happy with the end product, I would have felt comfortable asking them for more of their time. If they did not respond or did not seem pleased with the piece, I would have thanked them for their time and moved on to another project. Fortunately, they were delighted with what I sent them. Because they were excited over what I had made for them, I let them know that I wanted to go to their next drag show so I could work on collecting more footage. While I was not sure what I would do with all of the footage yet, I knew that I was building a critical connection that I wanted to cater to with Eric and Justin. After several hours of traveling to Starkville, Mississippi, and gathering more footage from a drag show at Dave's Dark Horse Cavern with Justin, I decided that it was time to do sit-down interviews and start working on a larger project with them.

On November 16, 2019, I booked interviews with Eric and Justin, each lasting about an hour and a half. I came prepared with a list of questions to ask each of them and a notebook and pen for taking notes. We set up the interview in Eric's studio at the Link Centre in Tupelo, Mississippi, which is about the size of a walk-in closet. It was cramped quarters, but we managed to make it work. The list of questions I brought with me are as follows:

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

I utilized these questions to gain a comprehensive insight into their lives. Any other questions that came up naturally during the interview process were written down in my notebook and asked throughout the interview when I deemed them appropriate. After gathering the two interviews, I began work on Queering the South: Through Drag (2019), a short fifteen-minute documentary about Eric White and Justin Tyler's relationship and the Southern inflection of what it means to be a drag queen in Northern Mississippi. This fifteen-minute documentary was the beginning of what would become my much larger thesis film project, The Hollidays in Mississippi (2022).

Between December 2019 and January 2020, I took a short pause after producing my film Queering the South Through Drag (2019). In February 2020, Eric White hosted the Tupelo Winter Pride at the Link Centre in Tupelo, MS, my first drag show of the 2020 year. I used this opportunity to gather footage of Eric and Justin getting ready for the show and working behind the scenes. It was the second semester of my first year as a graduate student, and I had already determined that my master's thesis and MFA thesis would be on the subject of Southern drag queens. I was so eager to get started on this project that I made several arrangements to travel to surrounding states such as Georgia, Kentucky, and Alabama to gather stories about drag
performers in the South. I had already started broadening my studies and initiatives by speaking with other North Mississippi performers to make connections outside of the state. I was unsure what project I would create for my master's degree. Yet, I knew that if I kept working, gathering footage, and establishing and maintaining contacts throughout the American South, something would eventually come together. And then my plans completely changed overnight.

Everything came to a standstill during the second week of March 2020. I recall that week so vividly. The flowers and leaves were sprouting again after a long winter, the birds were chirping, and bugs were digging themselves out of their underground holes. Because of COVID-19, we would be on lockdown for a few weeks due to the national emergency. As the earth was renewing itself again, we were stuck inside, hoping for the best. I ended up driving to my thesis advisor's office before campus completely shut down to pick up film equipment in case I needed it. We were only going to be on lockdown for two weeks, one being spring break, so I had no idea what I would do with the equipment, but it was nice to have it. I was looking forward to the break, but I was also planning to attend a drag show in Starkville, Mississippi, at the end of the month.

By the time May of 2020 rolled around, when we were all double masking, wearing gloves, spraying down our groceries, and making sourdough bread, I was heavily grieving for the project I thought I was going to create for my master's degree. Between phone calls telling friends how much I missed them, working on small crafts at my kitchen table late into the night to pass the time, and awkward Zoom calls, I avoided looking at the camera equipment sitting in the corner that I picked up in early-March. I slowly realized that the film I wanted to create for the degree I would receive in the spring of 2021 was fading out of view.
I spent the next several months incredibly anxious and depressed. Summer was in full swing, and I had previously made numerous plans to travel, conduct interviews, and conduct various types of fieldwork. Instead, we were all collectively living through a disturbing pandemic filled with death and decay. I could not help but feel guilty for mourning my graduate school projects, relationships, and experiences while the world was on fire. I spent the first half of summer 2020 anxiously pacing around my house, printing out articles for research, and spending time outside with my graduate school cohort in awkward, socially distanced circles. We spent a lot of time in our backyards, getting bitten by bugs and sweating through our shirts while eating, drinking, sharing stories, complaining about the circumstances, and, most importantly, crying over what the new world would now look like and grieving over the old world. We had no idea what was in store for us because the pandemic was so new and unfamiliar. That was incredibly challenging for us to cope with. We all felt like we were at the pinnacle of our lives, our adventures, our research, our education, and our relationships - and then it was all taken away from us. Accepting that was hard. Making new plans to move forward was harder.

By late June, I finally decided to discontinue my original thesis idea, a feature-length film based on the stories and experiences of Southern drag queens. Instead, I utilized what I had - three short films, photographs, and quotes, and I conducted two remote interviews with two Mississippi drag performers. The two performers that I did remote interviews with were Jada Lee Symone and retired drag queen Jack McCrory (Baby Holliday). With all of these moving parts, I decided to create a multimodal project using everything I collected in the fall of 2019 and early 2020 and the remote oral histories I recorded in the summer of 2020.

I completed this project that combined all of these projects into one multimodal project by the time I received my master’s degree in 2021. While it was not what I had initially
envisioned, working on this project and the natural discourse of what was going on allowed for a much more important story to emerge while transitioning toward my MFA. In between my project *Queering the South: Through Drag* (2019) and my thesis project for the MFA, *The Hollidays in Mississippi* (2022), I worked on many other short projects to fulfill my master's degree in 2021, including *Genderf*uck Drag* (2020), *Dude in a Dress* (2020), *Jada Lee Symone* (2021), and *Jack McCrory - Baby Holliday* (2021) were all projects I produced for my master's 2021 degree, "Queer Subculture in the Conservative South: A Study of Drag Performers in Mississippi." While I will not go into depth about these projects in this thesis because I previously did so for my master's thesis, it is crucial to note that they all contributed in some way to the much larger project for the MFA degree.

In the summer of 2021, after receiving my master's degree, I began planning my MFA thesis project. I was unsure which path I would choose, but I suspected my time with Eric White and Justin Tyler was coming to a close. I felt like I had gathered all of the stories I needed to tell with Eric and Justin, so I turned my attention to another potential project in Memphis, Tennessee. I then began working with Slade Kyle, a drag performer who goes by the stage name Bella DuBalle. I contacted them as soon as I finished my master's thesis defense because I felt like I needed to do damage control with all of the video I could not acquire during the pandemic. I was desperate to get back in the field.

Due to COVID-19, I was unable to conduct fieldwork between March 2020 and May 2021, except for one outdoor drag show held outdoors in a parking lot. Until I got vaccinated, however, I was not doing any fieldwork until I reached out to Slade Kyle in May of 2021. During the summer of 2021, I explored the potential idea of doing my MFA thesis on drag queens in Memphis, Tennessee. Instead of focusing on smaller towns in the South, as I did for
my master's, I thought it would be interesting to do a story on drag queens in Southern metropolitan areas, such as Memphis. I set up an interview with Slade Kyle, and shortly after that, I attended a drag show at the Atomic Rose, where they host a drag-brunch show on Sundays. When I got home that Sunday afternoon with all of my video, I immediately started piecing together a story and reaching out to other drag queens in Memphis who might be interested in collaborating on my MFA thesis film. Three days later, I woke up with a sore throat, a 100-degree fever, and no taste and smell. I had COVID-19.

My efforts came to a halt once more. COVID-19 made fieldwork extraordinarily challenging and tough to navigate, and I effectively concluded that I would not be doing any indoor fieldwork unless I was fully vaccinated. When vaccines became widely accessible, I made it a point to only work with vaccinated people. Before becoming vaccinated, I had many doubts, especially about risking my own and my family's health for the fieldwork I wanted to conduct. I had many questions about my own autonomy and ethics in conducting fieldwork during the pandemic. While working on my master's thesis, I researched COVID-19 and how it affected documentary fieldwork.

While there were not many articles at the time, I did come across one interesting article written by Rebecca Hanson and Patricia Richards in 2017, well before COVID-19. In their article *Sexual Harassment and the Construction of Ethnographic Knowledge*, Hanson and Patricia focus on the issues of embodiment and reflexivity in dangerous fieldwork situations. One of the questions asks, "what makes a good ethnographer?" In this study, many participants thought that "doing anything for the data," even in dangerous scenarios, made you a good ethnographer and researcher. In this article, one participant even said, "my want for information for the research was so strong that it trumped my needs for safety…I think that makes it hard to
walk away from a situation where you could get some great data." 58 I found this article interesting because it immediately made me think of my own positionality and my own autonomy as a documentarian trying to do work in the middle of a pandemic. Was I a lousy documentarian because I did not want to do fieldwork during the COVID-19 pandemic? Was I not taking enough risk? Was I a lazy documentarian because I "wasn't doing anything for the data"? I struggled with this and my own reflexivity, not only as a documentarian but as a person who had a responsibility to my community. In that sense, being behind the camera and observing without necessarily interacting with the individuals I am working with often causes them to forget that I am there. I essentially become invisible. Because of COVID-19, I thought about the camera vs. my body and what that meant for my presence in a potentially dangerous environment.

There were so many hard questions I was asking myself, and I ultimately decided that I would continue my fieldwork after vaccination and full inoculation. I decided that it was impossible for me never to do any fieldwork again and that if I took all the necessary precautions, I could feel good about the fact that I tried my best to avoid it and spread it.

It was difficult to make the decision to continue fieldwork during COVID-19. By May of 2021, I developed the habit of staying indoors, ordering my groceries online, and only meeting with friends and instructors outside when it was safe to do so. The mask regulations had just lifted in the summer of 2021, community vaccination was at an all-time high, cases were low, and I felt like things were finally turning around. This was the opportunity to get back into fieldwork if I was going to do it. Nonetheless, I was mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted. The entire world was going through a deadly pandemic, I had just caught COVID-19,

and I had just finished my master's degree, and yet, I was still trying to play catch-up for a project that I felt like I still needed to finish. I had not even let myself grieve the trauma we were all facing, let alone rest from just finishing a degree. While I was recovering from my illness, I decided to take the rest of the summer for myself.

When school resumed in August of 2021, I was fully prepared to take on this new project. I decided that I was going to produce a film about Eric White's and Justin Tyler's familial drag relationships and Slade Kyle's and their two drag children's familial drag relationships. I felt that a story about the contrast between drag families in small-town Mississippi and drag families in metropolitan Memphis, Tennessee, would be intriguing. When I informed my thesis advisor about this idea, he cautioned me that I only had a year to complete this project for the MFA. Given the MFA timeframe, it would be challenging to approach a new idea with new characters to produce a new story. Instead, my advisor encouraged me to expand on the project I already had put so much time and effort into. While I agreed with him, I was once again anxious about the direction of my project.

I decided to return to my roots and contact Eric White for a follow-up interview, seeking to discover more about his familial relationship with Justin Tyler. After all, they were a drag family, and I reckoned a story about a drag family in North Mississippi would be noteworthy. Moreover, I felt that conducting a follow-up conversation with Eric White about the topics of my new plan would help me cement my project ideas. I had less than a year to edit my documentary and write a new thesis, and I knew I needed fresh interview footage with Eric since we conducted our last interview in 2019. Eric assisted me in carrying my equipment inside the Link Centre in Tupelo, Mississippi on a sweltering September afternoon in 2021. In a forlorn tone, Eric broke the news and said, "I'm done with drag, Christina. I can't do it anymore. I'm done for..."
real. This is it for me." I was completely taken aback. Everything I had worked so hard for was crumbling. The entire story I wanted to tell began to vanish. But after further reflection, it dawned on me that this was the story I needed to tell.

My last interview with Eric was remarkably therapeutic, not only for him but also for me. We talked about how he spent so much time for twenty years creating a safe LGBTQ scene in North Mississippi, but it was challenging to make the community reciprocate. It was difficult to get people to help donate, set up, tear down, or promote drag shows in Tupelo, MS. Eric, the only LGBTQ show director in Tupelo, MS, found it increasingly difficult to recruit people to assist in the creation and preservation of queer space in North Mississippi. With Mississippi being a conservative state and the prevalence of COVID-19, the odds were stacked against the LGBTQ community in a multitude of ways. With a deadly pandemic, people did not want to congregate, and Eric even told me that he stopped holding shows because he did not want to be the cause of COVID-19 community spread in an area where resources and healthcare were already scarce. Eric also explained that he felt like many people in the community were scared to participate in pride and drag shows because of the history of queer spaces being a target for police violence. Eric spent over twenty years trying to create and maintain queer space in North Mississippi, and he decided it was time to retire and concentrate on himself and his medical career. As I was packing up my equipment, Eric told me I needed to do a follow-up interview with Justin as well.

I scheduled a follow-up interview with Justin for the following weekend, September 19, 2021. During our interview, I primarily focused on follow-up questions from Eric's interview. I was curious how he was dealing with Eric's retirement from drag. As Justin’s drag mother, Eric heavily mentored him for three years, and I wanted to focus on this story arc in which Eric was
not only retiring from performing and hosting drag shows in North, Mississippi but also passing
the baton of his legacy to his prodigy, Justin. Eric trusts Justin to keep the LGBTQ space in
North Mississippi alive after he had taught and mentored him for so long, and this conversation
effectively became the context of our interview. With the two interviews I conducted in October
2019 and the two follow-up interviews in September 2021, I finally had enough to tell a
compelling and unique story about a struggling LGBTQ subculture in the conservative South.
While I did attend one or two more drag shows after the follow-up interviews in 2021, I had
enough B-Roll and observational footage to help drive the story forward. Therefore, I
immediately began my edit to tell this story that would soon become, *The Hollidays in
Mississippi*, which I completed in May of 2022.

Section II. Interview Methodologies and Research

The following section of this chapter will cover methods and research. This research was
critical for me as a documentary filmmaker because documentary work is complex on many
levels. This section will cover interview methodology, organization, editing, and storytelling.
Before I scheduled my first initial interviews with Eric and Justin in 2019, I spent a few months
researching and studying interview methodology and the best ways to approach and conduct
interviews. I spent a lot of time reading texts like *The Oral History Reader*, which included many
important articles like "Learning to Listen" by Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, "Towards an
Ethic of Silence" by Alexander Freund, "What Makes Oral History Different" by Alessandro
Portelli, and others that I will mention later in this section.

In his article "What Makes Oral History Different," Alessandro Portelli emphasizes the
spoken word as a narrative, historical source. He distinguishes between written and oral records,
stating that oral history work is essential because many groups of people may not have the resources or the thought to write down their history. However, it does not make their stories less important. This is significant because many people go about their lives without realizing that their life stories can contribute to larger bodies of research and historical accounts. Each oral history collected, transcribed, and archived helps piece together specific ideas, theories, and historical research.

In "Learning to Listen," I discovered that getting caught up in preconceived notions about how an interview should go is easy. For example, a documentarian may go into an interview with a set number of questions and ideas that drive the story one way, while the interviewee wishes to tell a completely different story. Therefore, it is vital to set aside agendas before going into the interview. If the documentarian does not set aside their own agenda, not only will important questions go unanswered, but the narrator will notice that you are not listening to their story but rather trying to coach them into stories and answers you want them to say. It is also crucial not to interrupt the narrator during the interview. I learned that when the narrator has finished speaking, do not immediately ask your next question. Instead, pause to allow the narrator to elaborate or reflect on what they just said. Finally, I learned from this article that it is critical to provide space for the narrator to express and work through their emotions. Memory, particularly when linked to difficult situations and trauma, can be challenging to work through. While documentarians are not psychologists or therapists, oral history and documentary work are frequent places for people to reflect on complex ideas, topics, and feelings. It is critical to allow narrators to feel safe in expressing those emotions.

In Alexander Freund's article "Towards an Ethics of Silence," I learned that silence in an interview with the narrator has several different meanings. It can mean the following:

- Rejecting a request to answer a question
- Discomfort, anger, fear, or distress,
- Censorship and suppression,
- Remembering or forgetting
- A loss of jurisdiction in the interview and regaining their agency
- Careful consideration of the question

I have listed these possibilities because there are numerous advantages to analyzing various types of silences during an interview process. Recognizing how to analyze the narrator's silence can help us as documentarians move on to the next question, restate the question, or return to it later after establishing rapport.

I also studied how to conduct an interview properly, especially when conducting oral histories. I learned to begin the interview with broad questions about the person's life in order to establish rapport and gauge how they respond to specific questions. Asking difficult questions right away will almost certainly be met with reluctance, and volunteering sensitive information may be difficult at the start of the interview. Following that, using a two-sentence format is the best way to ask a question. It allows the documentarian to explain why the question is important while also prompting the interviewee to respond. The first sentence in the two-sentence format provides an understanding of the discussion at hand, and the second sentence poses as a question. For example, it could look like this: "You mentioned earlier in the interview that you are leaving your position as a drag show host in Tupelo, Mississippi. What ultimately led you to that conclusion?" This format establishes that the documentarian is listening to the narrator while

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incorporating a smooth transition into a question, so the question does not appear to have emerged randomly.\textsuperscript{62}

While there are many more essential articles and journals on interview methodologies and evolution, these were the articles I read and relied on the most to help me navigate the interview process in order to successfully, ethically, and respectfully draw out enough material to construct a story.\textsuperscript{63}

Section III. Equipment and Process

Section III of this chapter will include the equipment I used, the filming and editing process, and the construction of editing and creating a story.

Equipment:

- Panasonic GH4
- Panasonic GH5s
- TASCAM-DR-05
- RODE Shotgun Mic
- Two LED panel lights
- Headphones
- 128GB SD cards
- LaCie 5TB hard-drive
- Interview footage and observational footage shot at 24fps
- B-Roll shot at 96fps
- Adobe Premiere Pro
- Adobe Audition
- Temi Audio Transcription

Process:


I had numerous discussions with colleagues and classmates about what it meant to be a documentary filmmaker. While we had multiple conversations about the ethics of being a documentary filmmaker and the various approaches to interviewing individuals, we also had conversations about documentary filmmaking as an art form. One of my filmmaking classes had a lively discussion on the usage of 360-degree cameras and how the ability to capture everything at once ensured that you did not miss any potential material and that the decision-making process was only essential when editing. The basic idea was that the 360 camera made documentary filmmaking easier. While I initially agreed with the sentiment, I believed it detracted from the decision-making process in the field and diminished the value of knowing how to "see" via the camera lens. There is something significant about the creative and knowledge process involved in selecting a specific person or object to film at a specific time. By choosing a particular object to record, I am deciding that this is the most important thing in the room for me at that time.

Another filmmaker could consider something else to be the most essential thing in the room, and they would have excellent reasons for doing so. The 360 camera removes that internal thought and knowledge, and I believe it also removes an essential aspect of what it means to be a documentary filmmaker. Using a camera to "see" necessitates active and intentional effort and, most crucially, observation. While some may claim that having a 360 camera makes the selection process in post-production easier, I believe that art should not be an easy way out of how we experience and comprehend the world around us. If we all created movies with cameras that could capture everything around us, we would end up presenting the same stories, and they would become more objective, which is the polar opposite of what art is supposed to portray. Therefore, documentary work goes beyond just entertainment and becomes a platform for a
deeper discussion about our world. Documentary filmmaking not only introduces us to new ways of thinking, but it also serves as a catalyst for the expression of human consciousness.

In his article *A Theory of Film Documentary*, Taihei Imamura argues that it is impossible to cover everything about a subject in documentary filmmaking. Every time a documentarian points their camera at a specific object or person, Taihei asserts, they make an informed choice. The filmmaker must know something about the object they have chosen to record. To elaborate, it is impossible to make a film without knowing what you are documenting. Assume that a documentary filmmaker views many objects in the world as equal parts of a larger narrative. In that circumstance, deciding what will or will not be filmed and used in a project is impossible. The documentarian must have a cause for pointing their camera at a specific object at a specific time. A documentary film merely represents reality as the documentarian perceives and understands it. As a result, "the documentary film is not a document of mere exterior world events through the medium of film; rather it must be a record of- and an expression of-human knowledge."64 Because documentary filmmaking will never be an objective medium, there is something to say about understanding the world through another person's lens. If we perceived the world as an amalgam of objective facts, there would be no critical and artistic thought further to push our ideas of the overall human experience. These conversations and research methodologies helped me become the documentarian I am today.

Before I went home after conducting my interviews, I always wrote in my field notes notebook to remember any necessary details and information from the interview just in case I needed to recall a specific interview or event. Once I get home, I save all of the footage and

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audio to my hard drive and then back it up immediately to another hard drive. After I back everything up, I create numerous folders for my footage and audio. My folders look like this:

Thesis > Footage > Interviews > November 16 2019 > Eric White > Video & Audio
Thesis > Footage > Drag Shows > Atomic Rose_05/2021> Video & Audio
After I have organized the footage, I go through and label the footage depending on what is in it. For example, this could appear as follows: P1370297.MP4 GoDiva welcoming the audience Tupelo Winter Pride 02/2020. I always log my footage as thoroughly as possible because it makes editing faster and more efficient. I always keep the original file name while logging, just in case I need to refer to a backup copy. I also created a footage spreadsheet in which I organized all of my footage by subject, file name, folder, description, themes, time codes, duration, other notes, and screenshots. This was time-consuming on the front end, but it allowed me to carefully go through all of my footage and select the best observational footage and b-roll to help drive the story forward. I also kept a color key, so I knew which footage I used in my Premiere Pro timeline. Because I had a lot of footage, the color key helped me stay organized so I would not accidentally use a clip twice in my timeline.

I began transcribing all of the interviews after logging and reviewing all of my footage. I stored the interviews in a transcription program called Temi to print them out and start reading through them. Having physical copies of the interview transcript enabled me to highlight and mark up specific ideas and themes to aid the flow of the story, and reading the transcripts was faster than sitting through and listening to the interview repeatedly. The interview transcripts assisted in the formation of my skeleton edit in Premiere Pro.

Once I read through the transcripts, I began cutting together the skeleton edit. I did this by putting each interview into a separate sequence in my timeline. Then, I started splicing the
sequence as it correlated to the timestamp in the transcript. The skeleton edit involved only the interview selects that I felt were relevant to the story, and while I cut together the skeleton edit, I made a rough idea of where all of the pieces of the story would go. Next, I broke the story up into three chapters. Each chapter held a specific theme related to the overarching story that Eric was retiring from drag and Justin was taking the baton to help keep the legacy of queer space in North Mississippi alive. Once I felt that I had a general skeleton edit laid out, I began putting everything in place by rearranging, cutting off the fat, and adding certain elements to make the story flow better. I began to call this my radio edit. In Premiere Pro, you can hide the footage and listen to the audio when you are editing footage. I opted to do this because I felt like the footage was a distraction while trying to lay out my story. Once I was finished with my radio edit, it was time to bring it to my thesis chair for a first listen.

For the next month and a half, my thesis chair and I listened to the radio edit so we could discuss the flow of the story. I came back with many revisions, and by November, I was ready to start fleshing out the other parts of the edit, such as adding B-Roll, observational footage, and music. After adding these elements, I once again sat down with my thesis advisor (and, on occasion, other colleagues) to get notes and ideas. I wanted to make sure there were no gaps in the story and that the b-roll and observational footage made sense. Between the radio edit and the final cut, I had many versions and passes of the film. I had over ten different sequences in Premiere Pro because if I decided to make a significant change, I did not want to sacrifice the original Premiere Pro file just in case I ended up not liking the edit. During this process, my advisor and I would occasionally sit down and look through new edits and changes I had made throughout this timeline.
During my spring break, I watched several iterations of my film. I used this time to add pieces here and there, remove portions, and incorporate artistic elements. However, I had the impression that something was missing as I watched the film. While the story and characters in the film were fascinating, I felt like something was missing to make the film feel like an experience. I took all of my 96fps b-roll, filmed some experimental elements, and found some slow experimental music to use as elements to connect my chapter markers. This served two purposes: it fulfilled my desire for my film to have a bit of an experimental element to heighten the audience's experiences, but it also provided breathing room to process what the narrators were saying. As consumers, we are frequently bombarded with cognitive overload, and I wanted to give the viewer time to breathe and reflect on what had just occurred. Once I had all of these new elements, I was finally in a picture lock by early spring. I began editing the audio and color-correcting the footage, and by the end of April, I was ready for my first public viewing.

The filmmaking and editing process is highly time-consuming, tedious, and exhausting. A four-minute observational piece about two North Mississippi drag queens getting ready for a fundraiser in Memphis, Tennessee, grew into a 35-minute documentary about Southern LGBTQ struggles. I want to point out that this process was not as straightforward as it appeared. I often went back and reread transcripts several times, adding details and removing others in my Premiere Pro timeline, while also working through my footage spreadsheet. While this was mostly a linear process, there were times when I needed to go back to the fundamentals of making a documentary. Even when I was on my third or fourth pass, I would essentially decide that the story flow did not make enough sense, and I would restart the project in some aspects. Documentary filmmaking and editing have many moving parts that all come together at the end,
and as storytellers, we must remember that it takes time to film and put together a compelling story.

The table below (Figure 1) shows the timeline of how this project began, progressed, and ended. I had over 125 hours of footage to edit into a 35-minute film for my thesis, and I wanted to show the project's progression. Throughout the timeline, I begin on October 10, 2019, when I attend Dr. Wilkerson's oral history class drag show. I brought a camera with me that night, hoping to use the footage for another class project I was working on. This project's timeline concludes on May 10, 2022, with the screening of my final exhibition thesis. Between these two dates, I filmed many events and interviews, as well as had countless feedback screenings from my thesis committee, classmates, and colleagues. It was tedious and excruciating to watch my film repeatedly, but it was necessary to understand and apply feedback. I included my timeline below because I felt that it is important to include it in this chapter. Readers researching how to compose a documentary might find this timeline helpful in understanding the complexities of creating a story.
(Figure 1) Project Timeline Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>FOOTAGE USED?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10/10/2019</td>
<td>Drag show - Tupelo, MS</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>10/19/2019</td>
<td>Observational footage with Eric White and Justin Tyler - Tupelo, MS</td>
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<td>10/29/2019</td>
<td>“Put On Your Face” (2019) short film completed</td>
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<td>Bingo Drag Show - Starkville MS</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>Interviews with Eric White and Justin Tyler - Tupelo, MS</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>11/21/2019</td>
<td>Drag Show - Oxford, MS</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>12/01/2019</td>
<td>“Queering the South: Through Drag” short film completed</td>
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<td>Drag Show - Tupelo, MS</td>
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<td>02/8/2020</td>
<td>Drag Bingo - Starkville, MS</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>02/14/2020</td>
<td>Drag Show - Oxford, MS</td>
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<td>Interview with Taylor Green - Starkville, MS</td>
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<td>“Gender*ck Drag” (2020) Short film completed</td>
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<td>05/01/2020</td>
<td>“Dude in a Dress” (2020) Short film completed</td>
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<td>Remote Interview - Jada Lee Symone</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>07/23/2020</td>
<td>Remote Interview - Jack McCrory (Baby Holliday)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/21/2021</td>
<td>Drive in Drag Show - Oxford, MS</td>
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<td>04/01/2021</td>
<td>“Jack McCrory (Baby Holliday) Audio Documentary” completed</td>
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<td>“Jada Lee Symone Audio Documentary” completed</td>
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<td>Event Description</td>
<td>Rating</td>
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<td>04/14/2021</td>
<td>Thesis Defense - Southern Studies Master's Degree</td>
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<td>Interview with Slade Kyle (Bella DuBalle)</td>
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<tr>
<td>05/16/2021</td>
<td>Drag Show - Tupelo, MS</td>
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<td>05/25/2021</td>
<td>Drag Show - Memphis, TN</td>
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<td>06/12/2021</td>
<td>Drag Show - Oxford, MS</td>
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<td>09/4/2021</td>
<td>Interview with Eric White (Follow-up) - Starkville, MS</td>
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<td>MFA Workshop feedback screening with prior footage and interviews</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Interview with Justin Tyler (Follow-up)/Drag Show - Memphis, TN</td>
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<td>10/14/2021</td>
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<td>Radio Edit feedback screening with Andy Harper</td>
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<td>Skeleton edit feedback screening with Andy Harper</td>
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<td>Prospectus Defense with thesis committee</td>
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<td>Feedback screening with Melanie Ho (South Docs colleague)</td>
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<td>11/16/2021</td>
<td>MFA Workshop feedback screening</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td>“Slade Kyle - A Short Profile” short documentary completed</td>
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<td>Rough cut screening with Andy Harper</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Rough cut screening with Andy Harper</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
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<td>Notes</td>
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<td>03/16/2022</td>
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<td>Final cut screening</td>
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<td>First public film screening at the Glitterary Festival (University of Mississippi)</td>
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<tr>
<td>05/10/2022</td>
<td>Thesis exhibition screening - Oxford, MS</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

The lack of queer documentation in Southern small-town and rural spaces is questionable. Leaving out queer Southerners in the overall LGBTQ conversation in the United States can indicate several factors. First, ignoring Southern queer voices can subconsciously signal that queer Southerners do not exist. Second, it shows that queer Southern voices are not worth documenting. Third, it indicates that the queer Southern experience is not worth exploring, thus glorifying the metropolitan gay experience. Fourth, putting the metropolitan gay experience at the forefront sends the wrong idea that the queer experience is monolithic. And last but certainly not least, the lack of queer Southern documentation leaves out a stunning proportion of Black queer voices. These ideas create a snowball effect of problems that come with the lack of queer South documentation, which has the overarching stereotype and toxic conclusions of metronormativity.

I. Key findings in my research:

The complicated history of drag, metronormative philosophies, and self-made documentarians were some of the key findings in my research. The history of drag is essential to examine because it establishes how people of many different eras, ethnicities, and geographies have always participated in female impersonation. Drag is not a new concept; rather, it is a way people have explored theater, gender, class, and, more recently, queerness. Exploring the

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65 According to the UCLA School of Law (Williams Institute) website, 51% of Black LGBTQ Americans live in the South, from a 2021 demographic study. https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/black-lgbt-adults-in-the-us/
historical side of drag is vital in understanding the context of how drag operates today. The notion that queer people have always existed in these Southern spaces is also important to recognize, despite the ideas of metronormative philosophies. Recognizing that Southern LGBTQ people exist and work hard to create safe spaces for each other goes directly against metronormativity or the idea that queer people can only thrive in metropolitan spaces. Lastly, the rise of self-made documentarians through social media platforms is a uniquely modern concept. With directors and producers creating queer stories that are not accurate, queer people are reclaiming their autonomy and their own queer experiences through platforms like YouTube and TikTok. Coming out videos is a popular genre on these platforms, and even though many creators may not identify themselves as documentarians, these videos are documentary-like in nature because these experiences and stories are archived online for others to see and relate to.

II. Key Findings in my own work:

There were many key findings in my own work as well. My film The Hollidays in Mississippi allowed me to explore a prominent queer scene in Tupelo, Mississippi, which I found fascinating because it is a red county. Red counties are historically more conservative and value the GOP's endeavors to diminish LGBTQ rights, and yet, Tupelo, MS, had a prominent queer scene through the efforts of Eric White. Although many queer residents of Tupelo, MS, responded positively to Eric's efforts, many of them did not want to be a part of making these events happen. For example, Eric often ran into many issues finding sponsors and volunteers to help finance drag shows and set up and tear down. Eric was confused by this dichotomy, and he speculated that part of the problem was people's past fear and trauma of targeted violence from

outsiders and police in gay bars and gay clubs. While there were pockets of queer space in North Mississippi, queer people are acutely aware of the ramifications of being LGBTQ in the conservative South, where being queer poses potential risks for discrimination and violence. I also got a unique perspective from a person who was not only a drag queen in Tupelo, MS but the only show director and producer in Tupelo, MS. I learned about his struggle of booking and creating shows all by himself with little to no outside help. This gave me a unique insight into the LGBTQ culture in North Mississippi.

III. Limitations:

There were two significant limitations in my work. COVID-19 made fieldwork difficult, and for a year and a half, I was unable to conduct any fieldwork except for one outdoor drag show. While I had plenty of work to push my story in the direction of where it needed to go, being able to conduct fieldwork on Justin and Eric struggling as drag queens during the pandemic between March 2020 and August 2021 would have created more context. This limitation was mainly out of my control, as I refused to do any fieldwork until I was fully vaccinated. While there were drag shows during COVID-19, and I was invited to many of them, I decided not to participate for fear of contracting a severe case of COVID-19 before vaccination. I do not regret these choices, but it is a limitation and a gap in the history of current events and how it relates to LGBTQ experiences and subculture.

Another limitation in this fieldwork is the lack of community conversations. Because Eric discussed that while people were excited to go to drag shows, many people were not keen on helping finance, produce, or volunteer at these events. It would have been helpful to talk to queer community members living in Tupelo, MS, to get their perspectives on this issue. Because I can
only rely on Eric's account and hypotheticals of these instances, I do not know precisely why people in the community do not reciprocate the way Eric hoped they would. The relevance of community voices would only be helpful in this written thesis and research and would hold no place in the film itself. Nonetheless, having different viewpoints from other people can help put things into perspective about community issues.

IV. How my work pushes the discourse of LGBTQ Southern Studies in new directions:

Other than the film *Small Town Gay Bar* (2006) directed by Malcolm Ingram, there are few documentary films about LGBTQ subcultures, such as drag queens in Mississippi. My film *The Hollidays in Mississippi* (2022) is the only (recent) documentary about small-town Mississippi drag queens trying to create safe LGBTQ spaces despite the odds stacked against them, such as community struggle, anti-gay legislation, and COVID-19. As discussed earlier, queer research and documentation in the South (especially in Mississippi) is rare. My film and research help bring a new story and new voices to the ongoing conversation about LGBTQ lives. While *Small Town Gay Bar* (2006) is a story about two Mississippi gay bars in Shannon, MS and Meridian, MS, and the struggles of oppression, *The Hollidays in Mississippi* (2022) brings a more recent and contemporary spin on these issues off oppression and hypocrisy. More importantly, my film highlights how these issues still need resolution. It is essential to note the relevancy and existence of queer space in Mississippi, but that it is harder to maintain and get other queer folks on board in terms of support, financial decisions, distribution of shows, and volunteer work. In conclusion, *Small Town Gay Bar* (2006) and *The Hollidays in Mississippi* (2022) are similar in terms of the message that they are trying to convey, but the two films are over fifteen years apart. This is a large gap of time with little change.
My film *The Hollidays in Mississippi* (2022) is especially unique because of how COVID-19 adds one more facet to issues stacked against the queer community in Mississippi. Queer Mississippi show coordinators and producers experimented with safe outdoor drag shows, such as the "drive in drag show." This was interesting because I researched other towns and cities participating in COVID-19 safe drag shows, and other than RuPaul's Drive N' Drag tour I did not see any other cities or towns participating in drive-in drag shows that were not directly related to RuPaul's Drive-N' Drag show. The documentation I was able to retrieve from the Mississippi drive-in-drag shows during COVID-19 adds to brand new research on how drag performers and artists were navigating the world during COVID-19 before vaccinations. It puts a unique perspective on the response to the pandemic and how drag performers (especially those who relied on getting paid through show producers and tips) navigated these spaces.

The drive-in-drag show hosted by Mississippi United in Pride was tough to watch. Show producers built stages to bring in order to perform in parking lots, had blow-up screens, and hired camera operators to film the event and project the live footage on the blow-up screen so people could see what was happening from their cars if they were too far away from the stage. The speakers were not loud enough to create a proper ambiance of a drag show. It was often cold, and there were many technical difficulties such as speakers glitching or songs changing abruptly due to problems with internet connectivity. While these organizations tried their best to keep drag alive during the pandemic, it simply was not enough. At best, the equipment was mediocre, performers dropped out of shows at the last minute due to communication issues between the...

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67 An idea taken from drive-in movie theaters.
68 RuPaul’s Drive N' Drag show was hosted during the spring of 2021 and the winter of 2021. The Mississippi drive-in-drag shows were held during the fall of 2020 through the spring of 2021. Based on this timeline, Mississippi drive-in-drag shows came before RuPaul’s Drive-N' Drag show.
69 This does not mean that other towns or cities did not do drive-in-drag shows, but because of the lack of documentation such as ads, flyers, social media posts, etc. I’m making an estimated guess that many places were not hosting drive-in drag shows during this time.
70 Hosted by “Mississippi United in Pride.”
show producers and the artists, and performers could only receive tips via Venmo or Cashapp. The drive-in-drag show did not last very long before it all fell apart.

When I first began this project in 2019, with a four-minute short film for a small class exercise, I had no idea that this was the project I would end up creating. I learned so many important things along the way, like building and maintaining trusting relationships, interview methodology to get the best out of my interviews, and learning to accept the inevitable changes that were coming my way. Learning to adapt through COVID-19 as a filmmaker was my biggest challenge, but as I stated earlier, it also allowed me to explore my work in many different ways. In my last interview with Justin and Eric, my last question for both of them was to explain what the documentary process was like for them on the other side. They explained that they had many filmmakers reach out to them in the past to work on projects with them, but as soon as the documentary crew interviewed them or filmed drag shows, they never heard from them again. They thought that I was another "documentary filmmaker" coming in with a project idea or a pitch, and they were essentially taking a chance with me. Based on their own experiences in the past with other filmmakers, they had no reason to trust that I would not do the same. They were pleasantly surprised when I produced my first film, *Put on Your Face* (2019) because no one else had given them a finished product before. They were also surprised when I wanted to keep working with them, going to drag shows with them, and spending time backstage. Over the years, I faded into the background. They became so comfortable with my presence that I blended into their surroundings. I am so grateful to have gained the trust and opportunity to work with these outstanding community members, and I am excited that there is one more project to add to the research and discussion of the queer South.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Beverly Greene. “Beyond Heterosexualism and across the Cultural Divide: Developing an Inclusive Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Psychology: A Look to the Future,”


VITA

EDUCATION

University of Mississippi
M.F.A. in Documentary Expression
Aug 2021 - June 2022

University of Mississippi
MA in Southern Studies
Aug 2019 - May 2021

University of Mississippi
Dual BA in Art and Southern Studies
Aug 2012 - May 2017

SELECTED FILM SCREENINGS

*The Hollidays in Mississippi* | Director | Cinematographer | Editor | Glitterary Festival | Oxford, MS | 2022
*Outstanding MFA Thesis Prize*

*Slade Kyle: A Short Profile* | Director | Cinematographer | Editor | Oxford Film Festival | Oxford, MS | 2022
*Best Student Film Award*

*Genderf*ck Drag* | Director | Cinematographer | Editor | Oxford Film Festival | Oxford, MS | 2021
*Hoka Award for Best Short Documentary*

*Dude in a Dress* | Director | Cinematographer | Editor | UM Film Festival | Oxford, MS | 2021
*Best Documentary Award*

*Queering the South through Drag* | Director | Cinematographer | Editor | Love Wins International Film Festival | Roslyn, NY | 2021
*Nominee for Best Student Film*

*Checked In* | Director of Photography | Editor | Oxford Film Festival | Oxford, MS | 2019

*Thacker Mountain Radio Hour* | Cinematographer | Editor | Oxford Film Festival | Oxford MS | 2018

*Birthing Video* | Director | Cinematographer | Editor | Cinematic Panic | Memphis, TN | 2018

*Oxford Film Festival | Oxford, MS | 2018*
**SWABS** | Director | Cinematographer | Editor |
Oxford Film Festival | Oxford, MS | 2017

**Layers** | Director | Cinematographer | Editor |
Oxford Film Festival | Oxford, MS | 2016

**PROFESSIONAL PROJECTS**

**Mississippi Creates: Big Clown** | Oxford, MS | 2022

*Who Killed Buster Sparkle?* | Oxford, MS | 2021 | Assistant Director | Producer |

**Mississippi Creates: Tyler Keith** | Oxford, MS | 2021 | Performance Camera Tech

**Mississippi Creates: Schaefer Llana** | Oxford, MS | 2021 | Performance Camera Tech

**Mississippi Creates: Big Clown** | Oxford, MS | 2022 | Director | Director of Photography | Editor | (trailer link:)

**Mississippi Creates: 5th Child** | Oxford, MS | 2022 | Performance Camera Tech (Link TBD)

**Mississippi Creates: Andrew Bryant** | Oxford, MS | 2022 | Performance Camera Tech (Link TBD)

**Surviving and Thriving: Covid-19 in the Mississippi Delta** | Sumner, MS | 2020-2021 | Director | Cinematographer | Editor |

**Twinless: The CJ Moore Story** | Editor | The Season | Oxford, MS | 2018

**GROUP EXHIBITIONS / GROUP WORK**

- *Joshua Brinley* | Oral History | Invisible Histories Project | 2019
- *Jessica Cogar* | Oral History | Invisible Histories Project | 2019
- *Birthing Video* | PROJECT(ion) | 2018
- *Avenue of Chromaticity* | PROJECT(ion) | 2019

**AWARDS, FELLOWSHIPS, & GRANTS**

- Outstanding MFA Thesis Prize | University of Mississippi | 2022
- Best Student Film | Oxford Film Festival | 2022
- Sue Hart Prize For Outstanding Paper in Gender Studies | University of Mississippi | 2021
- Best Mississippi Short Film | Oxford Film Festival | 2021
- Best Documentary Short | UM Cinema Festival | 2021
- Outstanding Body of Work | University of Mississippi Cinema Department | 2016
- UM Cinema Grant | University of Mississippi Cinema Department | 2016
- Oxford’s Favorite Filmmaker | The Local Voice Newspaper | Oxford, MS | 2015

**ACADEMIC CONFERENCES**

- Annual Isom Student Gender Conference (2022)
• Identity Across the Curriculum (2021)