

# Tupelo Pride

## Participant Observation Fieldnotes

October 11th and 12th, 2019

Invisible Histories Project-Mississippi (IHP-MS) turned its attention to Tupelo in 2019. In March of that year, Dr. Amy McDowell, a sociologist at the University of Mississippi (UM), contacted Rick Gladish to learn about Charles Smith and his legacy as DJ Prince Charles at various gay bars in the state, including Gladish's bar *Rumors*. That same year, McDowell and Dr. Jessie Wilkerson, a historian and southern studies scholar at UM, received an Isom Center Fellowship for a research project they proposed titled *Queer Life Histories in Mississippi*. Their collaborative research was an offshoot of the oral history project that Wilkerson and her graduate seminar (SST 560) launched in Oxford, Mississippi. With the Isom Fellowship, McDowell and Wilkerson hired graduate research assistants Hooper Schultz and Maddie Shappley to carry out life history interviews with individuals living in and around Tupelo. Schultz and Shappley completed their first interview with Gladish in the summer of 2019. Gladish recommended his friends Moe Bristow, Lena Conwill, Eric White (Godiva Holliday), and Julia "Star" Newsom for interviews. Their interviews are available in the IHP-MS digital repository at UM. Gladish and White invited IHP-MS to exhibit the project at Tupelo Pride on October 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> of 2019.

The attached fieldnotes were taken by sociology MA students as part of a graduate seminar titled *Religion, Gender, and Sexuality (SOC 651)* that McDowell taught, fall 2019. The observation guide that she created for the class is included at the end. The first four student entries are from Tupelo Pride's drag show/kick-off event which took place at the Link Centre on October 11, 2019. The last two entries are from the Pride gathering and march that took place in downtown Tupelo on October 12, 2019. For many students in the class, this was their first experience conducting qualitative research and writing up fieldnotes. Most students narrate their observations in the order in which they occurred, rather than by theme. Some entries are peppered with students' personal opinions and reflections on the events.

**A note on names:** The real names of performers, event organizers, and individuals involved with IHP are retained in these documents; pseudonyms are used for the individuals that students met and spoke with briefly at Pride.

**Key Words:** age, coming out, drag, family, IHP (Invisible Histories Project), protest, race, Rumors bar, *Small Town Gay Bar*, sponsorship, Toyota

## **Tupelo Pride Drag Show, Fieldnotes October 11, 2019**

**What:** Tupelo Pride drag show and kick-off event

**Where:** The Link Centre, Tupelo, Mississippi

**When:** Friday, October 11, 2019

**Time of arrival and departure:** 6:45-10:30 p.m.

**Student Researcher:** Chelsea Baddley

Tupelo Pride is a two-day event in Northeast Mississippi. On Friday night, a big party and drag show was held in a conference center – the conference center was once Harrisburg Baptist Church. On Saturday, a parade that took place in the middle of downtown Tupelo. I attended the celebration on Friday, October 11, 2019, which also happened to be the 31st National Coming Out Day. Maybe it was the route we took from Oxford to Tupelo, but as soon as we got into the city limits, I noticed at least four different mobile home dealerships on both sides of the highway. The road that the conference center was on looked like a typical, southern, main road filled with fast food restaurants, local mattress store, dollar store, churches, and a few banks.

We arrived at the conference center about 30 minutes before the event was set to start at 7:00 pm. There were only about ten cars there at the time. I did not see any signs outside that pointed out that Pride was being held here. Due to the rain and temperature dropping, it was extremely gloomy outside. The church had a yellowish, brick exterior and a white awning that led to the back doors of the conference center, which appeared to be the main entrance. Older, smaller, middle class homes surrounded the back side of the space.

We decided to make our way in around 6:45 pm. There was a small dimly lit lobby in the entrance with a table where two people were taking money, checking IDs, and putting wristbands on people. The table had a white tablecloth on it with rainbow streamers hanging off the front of

it. There were three standing posters by the door with information about the Invisible History Project. Already a small line had formed. My first interaction was with an older woman named Donna. She was a short, older, white woman, with a short gray mullet. She was wearing a red plaid button down shirt, plain blue jeans, brown work boots, and had a heavy southern accent. She was standing in line with her two older white male friends, who had on matching pink t-shirts with a white drag queen on it who would be performing later. Donna was extremely hospitable and seemed to thoroughly enjoy talking with our little group of classmates in line. I asked her if she was from Tupelo, which she replied that she is actually from south Alabama. She was very knowledgeable about all the upcoming LGTBQ+ events in the area and seemed to travel to them quite a bit. Donna said to add her on Facebook to hear more about the upcoming events. She mentioned the DJ for tonight in reference to his connection to Rumors, the gay bar featured in the documentary *Small Town Gay Bar*. When I told her that we all go to the University of Mississippi, she told me how much she loves rooting for Ole Miss. Donna was a member of the Mississippi National Guard, and during her time there, her unit was split between rooting for Ole Miss and Mississippi State.

After we got our wristbands, we entered the main room. There were different-colored balloons all over the ground. Pop music was playing, and there was a rainbow-colored disco light in the far right side of the room. To the right of the entrance, there were four tables all serving different purposes. The first table was for the Invisible History Project. They had pictures on the wall with different drag queens and stories on them. They also had rainbow cupcakes on another table. The next two tables were selling t-shirts for Tupelo pride and drink tickets. The workers selling t-shirts were all wearing one. I walked up to them and told them how much I loved the

design. An older, white woman told me how proud they were of how the design turned out. She sold me pretty hard on buying one, which I did.

After that, I made my way to the drink table and saw a friend, who identifies as a gay man and is a junior at the University of Mississippi. He said he got roped into volunteering as a bartender just a few hours before the event. He was wearing a rainbow-lettered pride baseball t-shirt. He seemed busy and said he would talk to me when he got a chance. There was another table against the wall that had different cokes and water bottles on it that were free.

In the middle of the room, there were about ten different tables that were reserved for specific guests. I found out later that the reserved tables were for those who helped sponsor and donated money to Tupelo pride. They had navy blue tablecloths on them, glow sticks, little pieces of paper with the Tupelo Pride logo on it and a schedule, and small bits of confetti. Individual chairs were lined up in a row on both sides of the room for those who did not belong to the reserved tables. The DJ table was directly to the right of the stage.

There was no room in the middle for dancing or gathering, only a small space between the tables and the stage that was designated for the queens to dance during their performances. Near the entrance and the Invisible History project table, there were blank white pieces of paper on the wall with permanent markers attached to it where people could write down their experiences involving queer history in Mississippi.

As people started to pile in, I noticed that most of them were white and older. I had only been to a few pride parade events, which were in Memphis, TN, about two hours north of Tupelo, MS. In my experiences, participants usually dress up very boldly with rainbow tutus, face paint, and revealing clothing. Most of the older participants were dressed in everyday casual clothing. I made my way around the room and struck up a conversation with an older white

woman and her white husband. She was wearing a black and white checkered blazer with a red turtleneck and jeans. Her husband had on a salmon-colored button-down shirt, black vest, and blue jeans on. They both work for Toyota. There is a big Toyota plant near Tupelo. They began telling me how Toyota is a huge sponsor for Tupelo pride, LGBTQ+ rights, and even have their own diversity and inclusion department. They told me that the Tupelo Toyota plant donated thousands of dollars to Tupelo Pride and that is why they have a spot at one of the tables, for which they offered me a seat when the show started. The woman told me how much they love this event and said “It’s important because it brings people together!” I asked them if they have always lived in Tupelo, which they replied that they are from Memphis and moved here recently to avoid the long commute. The husband kept touching my shoulder when he spoke. They told me all about the tent that Toyota will have set up for the Pride parade on Saturday and all the activities they have planned.

Around 7 pm, the room was getting pretty full, and pop music was still playing. There was a local reporter for a news station in Tupelo by the front door getting footage of the event. I took a seat in a chair next to the wall on the left side of the room. I sat next to a younger white man (son) wearing a blue short-sleeve polo shirt and an older white woman (mom) wearing bright blue cowboy boots. I introduced myself and asked them where they were from and if this was their first time at Tupelo Pride. The guy said that they are from Tupelo and that he attended last year’s event. The woman replied with a small scoff and said that she has never been to one, but her son dragged her to this one.

A man in his mid-30s sat next to me on the other side of the mother and son. His name is Todd and that he just moved to Tupelo from Atlanta in May. Todd was a bigger man, with a beard, and was wearing a leather vest over a floral, short-sleeve, button-down shirt. He is used to

larger-scale pride events like the one in Atlanta. He told me that his reason for coming tonight is that he “had to come see where all the gay people are in Tupelo” and that “I did not know there was this many gay people in MS.” I asked him to hold my seat while I went to the restroom. On my way to the restroom, I stopped and talked to this older, white, male couple. One of the men was wearing a Cher shirt, which I stopped and told him how much I loved it. He said they just saw her perform live in Louisiana. I then asked them if they were from Tupelo and if they had been to Tupelo pride before. They replied that they have not been before and don’t usually leave the house but felt like seeing what this was all about.

When I got back to my seat next to Todd, a drag queen named Godiva came on the stage and introduced herself as tonight’s host. She was dressed in a flowy, red dress, with long, red gloves, sparkly jewelry, and red knee-high heeled boots. Godiva thanked everyone for coming and made numerous vulgar and funny sex jokes throughout the night. Her jokes consisted of making fun of gender stereotypes. For example, one joke she said later in the night was “I am a lady. I don’t shave!” Godiva made sure that the crowd was participating and regularly asked for them to make more noise. Up first, she introduced the Invisible History Project leaders, where they gave a speech on what their project is about. After their speech, there was a little time left before the drag show began, where more pop music was playing and people conversated with one another. I asked Todd some more questions about how he ended up in Tupelo. He said he was at a furry convention in Olive Branch, MS, where he met a group of people from Tupelo. They persuaded him to move in with them, which he said that it was time for a change of scenery. He told me that he is the “queer of the house.” I went and got a bottle of water and approached Donna’s table before I went back to my seat. I asked her if she was having fun, and she replied with “Oh yeah, you bet I am.” I told her that the Invisible History Project was a part

of my school and that it was funny that she mentioned Rumors earlier because we just watched a documentary on it. She told me that I need to speak to Tom and Ronnie because they met at Rumors and have been married for ten years this coming December. They were the two men wearing the pink shirts with a drag queen on it from earlier, sitting at the table.

Ronnie was a shorter, bald man, and Tom was a bit taller, missing some teeth, and was wearing a camouflage hat. Ronnie started to tell me about how they met one night at Rumors and went home together. Tom stayed the whole weekend at Ronnie's house, then moved in the next week, and never looked back. They said that the very same day gay marriage was legal in MS they went to the courthouse and "tied the knot." I told them how much I admired their love story and asked them if they have any big plans for their 10-year anniversary. Ronnie said that they just got back from a trip to Nashville, where they went to a wax museum. Tom mentioned how big of a fan Ronnie is of country music singer, Reba McEntire, to which I replied with "me too." Ronnie pulled out his phone and showed me the pictures of him with Reba's wax figure and began telling me about her whole biography. He told me that he almost named his daughter Reba but decided to make her middle name the same as Reba's middle name. I used this opportunity to ask about their children. Ronnie and Tom both have two daughters from different marriages. Ronnie said that his oldest daughter is about to have a baby and that they are excited about becoming grandfathers. Tom showed me a couple of pictures of his daughters and told me, to his dismay, that his oldest daughter just dropped out of high school and is working on her GED. He said "in her defense, she went to an all-black school and had trouble learning." I told them that I better get back to my seat before the show starts, and I thanked them for talking to me.

Godiva came on the microphone and got everyone's attention. I cannot remember the context of the joke, but she mentioned that her day job is as a nurse. She wanted to thank a

special couple who helped put on this event. Godiva called this white, older, lesbian couple to the stage and made some jokes about how lesbian couples never last long. She said “when have you ever seen lesbian couples last this long? They are there one second, and, poof, they are calling U-Haul and gone the next.” Todd thought that was hilarious, as did most of the crowd. The two older white men with the Cher shirt sat on the opposite side of Todd, and they did not tip the whole time I sat next to them.

Godiva asked the crowd how many people went to the first Tupelo pride, and from what I could see only about ten people raised their hands. Next, she asked how many people were there tonight attending their first drag show, and about twelve people raised their hands. Godiva was the first performance. She started on the stage and made her way around the room. Todd and I both had our money out and ready. As she got around to us, she dropped low in front of me and said “if that motherfucking music messes up again, I am going to lose it.” I put the two dollar bills in her cleavage, and she went on her way dancing back to the stage. The next couple of performances were white queens, mainly younger. They played both slower- and faster-paced pop songs sung by white artists during their performance. I noticed a white man in the middle of the room aggressively coming up to the performers during their sets and dancing all up on them. The first black queen danced to two songs by black artists. I noticed that Ronnie and Tom tipped several of the white performers, but they did not tip any of the three different black performers throughout the night. Also, I noticed that all of the black queens played mainly songs by black artists. There was only one white queen who played a song by a black artist.

About five performances in, it was extremely hot in there, so I decided to go outside and see what the smoking scene consisted of. Again, it was mainly white, older people outside. I was standing with two of my classmates and decided to invite this older, white male over who just

finished a conversation with a group of white women. Before we began talking, an older, black woman told us to move away from the door if we wanted to smoke a cigarette. The older, white man's name was Mitchel. I asked him if he was from Tupelo and if this was his first time at Tupelo Pride. He said that he is from Bruce, MS, and that this is his first time, but he goes to Pride and big gay events all over. I told him that I heard him mention something about Memphis in his conversation with the other group of people, to which he replied he is in Memphis about every weekend. All of his friends live there and he usually hangs out at Dru's Place and the Pumping Station, two popular gay bars in Memphis, TN. He also mentioned that he runs a leather and fetish club in Memphis called Hoist. I exclaimed how cool that is, and he asked me if I wanted a business card, to which I replied, "yes." I introduced him to my fellow classmates that I was standing out there with.

When I went back inside, I sat with the rest of my class on the opposite side of the room for the rest of the show. At the table nearest to where they were sitting, there was a group of black pride goers. The same white man from earlier who kept aggressively dancing with the queens was sitting at their table and throwing himself all over this bigger, black woman. She was obviously annoyed and discomfited by this man. During one of the performances, he tried to dance on one of the black queens who performed earlier. She absolutely rejected his advances and kept on dancing around him, but he continued to invade her space. He was a white, older man wearing an orange and red, plaid, button-down shirt with the sleeves cut off and blue jeans. Finally, someone got him some water and made him sit down. As the night went on, the crowd got smaller. My friend from college found me and started talking about how the bar has died down. I asked him if he made good tips, to which he replied that since it was volunteer, the money went to the Tupelo Pride organization.

There was an older, white man next to us in glasses, a short-sleeve polo shirt and shorts who was having the time of his life dancing and singing along to all the songs. About an hour into the drag show, my energy was failing due to the amount of screaming, clapping, and dancing I did earlier. I saw Todd make his way around the room, and I went up to him and told him that if he wanted to sit with my friends and me, he was more than welcome to. He eventually joined us.

With a few acts left, I decided to make my way outside one more time. The smokers seemed more drunk by then versus my trip outside earlier. There was a group of younger lesbians sitting on the curb trying to console a person whose mother was apparently making some bad decisions and screwing up her life. I watched as a few white women brought the very drunk and aggressive guy outside and sat him on a chair while his ride came and got him. One of the women was an organizer for the event. They tried very hard to keep him contained and not fall over. I also saw two younger, white kids, one male and one female stumble, out of the doors. The organizer asked where they were going. The boy replied as he held the girl up on his shoulder, “she is really drunk, so I am going to take her to the truck.” This worried me but the organizers let them go, so I did not say anything.

Next, a drunk, young, white woman dropped her phone as she was trying to open the door. She had short, curly, blonde hair and was wearing a black tank top, white short shorts, and black boots. I picked it up for her and she began telling me how cute I was. She asked me “are you heterosexual or bisexual?” I hesitated and started laughing because I have always identified as straight and dated men, but I am extremely attracted to women, have made out with women on multiple occasions, and hope to have more intimate experiences with women one day. She insisted that we exchange numbers and hang out after the party is over. She told me that her

name is Kinsey, lives in Alabama, and is only here for a couple of days. After our conversation ended, several of my classmates came outside and mentioned that they were ready to go, to which I agreed due to how tired I felt.

Even though I was extremely tired, I felt this amazing energy that I got from that event that was hard to describe. It was exhilarating watching the drag queens pour their hearts and souls into each performance. Growing up in Mississippi, I have only ever got that experience in Memphis. If I could go back and do interviews with anyone there, I would have wanted to interview more of the Toyota people who attended. It just seemed interesting to me that such a massive corporation was involved with a small-scale, liberal event like Tupelo Pride. I wanted to know more about their diversity department, for sure. It would be interesting to see if their policies and treatment towards LGTBQ+ workers match their mission statements, or if they are just trying to capitalize off of Pride.

## **Tupelo Pride Drag Show, Fieldnotes October 11, 2019**

**What:** Tupelo Pride drag show/kick-off event  
**Where:** The Link Centre, Tupelo, Mississippi  
**When:** Friday, October 11, 2019  
**Time of arrival and departure:** 5:40-11:15 p.m.  
**Student Researcher:** Maddie Shappley

### **Arrival**

Upon arriving at the Tupelo Link Centre, I worried about the turnout. The weather driving into to Tupelo looked stormy. The sky was filled with black clouds and the wind was blowing against the car. I wondered if the stormy weather would affect the number of people coming to the show. The gothic-style church building, however, blended seamlessly into an October stormy sky. I wondered if the drag would have a Halloween theme, and hoped that a Rocky Horror Picture Show song would be performed.

As I drove into the parking lot, the chatter of excitement started to grow. Hooper and I were excited to see the exhibit and be a part of the night's festivities. I also found myself expecting certain people to show up, like the people I have interviewed for the Oral History Project. I wondered if there was an expectation from the community as well since there is no LGBTQ exclusive space like Rumors anymore. I later thought this when I met David, a former Rumors patron. I had seen him at the Miss Tupelo Pride pageant and wondered if he came to these events to see those who were at Rumors with him.

### **Location and Set-up**

Finding the right entrance to the Link Centre proved challenging. We had to search through hallways to find the room where the show was happening. As we walked through the halls, I noticed several makeshift offices in the rooms of this previous church. One office plaque read

“Tupelo environmental.” It seemed as though anything and everything happened in this community center. While we continued to walk past rooms, we saw people working, usually at desks, in the rooms. I thought that these people must be dedicated to the city of Tupelo to still be working past 5pm on a Friday night. As we kept moving down the halls, we heard people talking. We turned to the right after a hallway and went through a door to some stairs that I recognized from the Miss Tupelo pageant.

As we walked down the stairs, I saw Eric White (Godiva), Dee Pression Holiday, and Holiday’s drag daughter. Holiday was in spandex, a hair cap, and a face full of makeup, helping another young drag queen in a chair in front of her. Hooper immediately recognized her and said hello. He asked if the show would be down here and Dee Pression told us yes “just through the doors.” I noticed that the set up for the drag show was the same as the Miss Tupelo pageant. People would come in from double doors on the side of the building. Once entered, they would pass a bathroom foyer to the left and see a long rectangle table on the left, under a staircase. Audience members would then pay to get in and walk straight into a bigger room.

Once we walked into the auditorium room, I again found the set-up familiar. There were about ten big round tables with chairs facing the stage at the front of the room. Some of these tables looked to be reserved. I found out later that night that the two long rectangular tables by the front of the stage were for VIP guests who had paid for them. I later questioned the purpose of this due to the queens walking around the entire room and not staying on the stage. A few tables were used to form a makeshift bar at the back of the room, near the entryway. This would be where drinks would be served to audience members and where two people worked the table all night. Next to the bar was another table where “Godiva” merch was being sold. I assumed all proceeds were being given to Eric.

When we entered into the auditorium, I saw Kevin Cozart setting up a table. Kevin was there with rainbow cupcakes, which we had asked him to bring. As we said hello to him, I saw Eric running around with athletic clothes on but a face full of makeup and a wig on. Eric came up and gave a warm friendly hug to me and I introduced him to my Hooper, my Invisible Histories Project – Mississippi (IHP-MS) collaborator, and my girlfriend. Eric asked if this was enough space for us and to let him know if we needed anything. As he left, I looked around and noticed a few people setting things up. One of these being Rick who was located toward the front and right side of the stage setting up audio equipment. Rick also did this at the Tupelo pageant, and I wondered if he helped Eric with audio.

Turning back to Kevin I noticed that we already had a table to set up for Invisible Histories Project (IHP). We had brought a second table just in case we needed one. Our table was located in the back of the room, right by the entrance. I thought this is great because this would be the first thing people will see when they enter the space. Hooper and I set up our second table and began to talk to Kevin. Kevin seemed excited for the events of the night and had prepared cupcakes for the IHP table.

There were two flags hanging on the wall. One of these flags was for the Bear brotherhood. This community pertains to gay men who are bigger in stature. I found this extremely interesting because I did not see a lesbian pride flag, a bisexual pride flag, a transgender pride flag, or anything else. I wondered if this was just the only other flag that someone could find because of that's all they had. Either way I found this extremely interesting. Along the stage were several more LGBTQ pride flags. Along the corners of the room were circle lights that emulate a disco ball with colors on the floor. There were several different color balloons scattered on the floor which were later popped.

While waiting I received a phone call from my classmate. When I answered, she asked me how and where to enter the Link Centre. I realized that those who have not been to a drag show at the Link Centre or anything else put on by Eric would have no idea where to enter. I met my friends outside and then showed them the way to the venue. As I was walking out, I noticed Rick again. He was unloading some equipment from his truck on the side of the building. I greeted him and asked how he was doing. He looked frazzled and crunched for time. He said he was “making it” and I wished him luck with the audio tonight. When I led my friends around to the back, the doors that I had come out of were locked. Dee Pression had to let us in.

### **Prepping the Table**

About twenty minutes later, Dr. McDowell and Dr. Wilkerson arrived with the rest of the items for set up. Hooper, my girlfriend, and I helped retrieve things out of Dr. McDowell’s car and then began to set up and re-arrange the tables. As this was happening, Maigen and Josh from the Invisible Histories Project arrived, and we all went to help them unload their stuff. My peers from class were helping a lot in any way they could too. I felt as though this was a great act of community involvement. We all helped set up signs that showcased the Invisible Histories Project and its expansion to Mississippi. During this time Hooper and I were shown the framed versions of Prince Charles’s records along with the ethnographic poems. Upon seeing these, I felt extremely proud. I was able to see physically the work I am doing in Mississippi. I later was able to see, when Eric was looking at his poem, how much these meant to the people of Tupelo to see parts of their life stories displayed as something special. It made me question if the LGBTQ people of Tupelo had ever felt special or important to our queer history in the south.

Putting the records and poems proved to be difficult. Again, putting the records, poems and community map up on the wall showed community involvement. I felt as though watching

those from Oxford pitching in to help set up and showcase things from Tupelo was a merge of worlds. As these were being put up, I kept trying to touch base with either Maigen, Josh, Dr. McDowell, or Dr. Wilkerson to get an executive decision. I saw that they were also trying to get an executive decision from Eric or someone else in charge. This proved difficult to navigate and we eventually ended up doing everything that we wanted (such as hanging the albums and butcher paper where we liked in the room). At this point, I noticed that others involved in planning and organizing Pride were roaming around the room, either in a frenzy or not knowing what to do.

### **Doors Open**

Around 7ish, after we had been running around trying to put everything in its place, people started to file in. I figured at this point that the doors had been opened for people to come in. At first, people were not stopping at the booth, until they turned around and saw the records on the wall. Dr. McDowell, Dr. Wilkerson, Hooper and I dispersed while Maigen and Josh stayed posted at the IHP table. As I was watching people come in, I noticed Donna walk in. I had met Donna at the Miss Tupelo Pride pageant. She had approached me and my girlfriend during the drag show. She greeted me with a slap on the shoulder and asked if I had been to Rumors bar before — I looked familiar. I told her about the record display and Prince Charles. She said that Charles had great taste in music at Rumors and that he was one of the funniest people she knew. I found this interesting because in *Small Town Gay Bar*, Charles was deadpan and blunt. After this conversation, Donna went to go get a drink.

After this, I saw my friends from the University of Mississippi. My friend Pace was wearing a shirt I had never seen before. It was a light pastel pink button-up that had an icon of cotton all around it. When I asked him about it, he said it was the most effeminate shirt he had

and felt it fit the show. At this point, I wondered if there were people from other towns at the Tupelo kick-off event. I was watching the people who came in and did not recognize anyone from Tupelo. This made me sad because I thought I would see some of the people I interviewed there. There was a mix of young people and older people. Throughout the night, however, I noticed that the younger people stood in the back of the room or on the sides, and the older people were sitting at tables. There seemed to be a big difference between people my age and the age of those who I have been interviewing for the Oral History Project, 45-60. These two groups seldom or never mingled throughout the night.

Dr. McDowell approached me and asked how it was going. I told her about Donna and about how I want to interview here. She encouraged me to go and ask her if she would be interested in an oral history interview. After getting up the courage, I went to a table that Donna was sitting at and asked if she would be interested in being interviewed. She said “Of course” and told me how she partied and hung out with all these people at Rumors. This made me wonder if people who frequented Rumors were at the drag event. I then wondered if they liked the exhibit. After this, I met David through Dr. McDowell. He was standing next to her at the Invisible Histories Project booth. It seemed as though he was sharing some of his experiences at Rumors. After some convincing, Dr. McDowell got David to write his name down on the sign-up sheet. I listened to David share his enthusiasm about Rumors – he kept saying that he wishes a gay bar still existed in town. At this point, I also wondered how many people were from Rumors and if they were here because they missed that bar.

### **On Stage**

Around 7:20 Eric came back, dressed in full drag, and asked if we wanted to go on stage.

Hooper, Dr. McDowell, Dr. Wilkerson, and I was under the impression that we were scheduled

to go on stage with Mo who had participated in the project to discuss what the project was about. I wondered again about how the event was organized. Then, Hooper and I were suddenly rushed to the stage to give a quick speech. As we walked on stage, Eric asked what he should do. We told Eric to say that we were part of the Invisible Histories Project and that we had a booth. Once Eric started talking, he rushed through our introduction and did not share the right information about Invisible Histories Project. Hooper took the mic to re-introduce us and then Hooper, me and Moe talked about the oral histories and the expansion of Invisible Histories to Mississippi.

### **Drag Show**

There were three major things I took note of during the show. The first was the crowd participation. There was a handful of participants tipping throughout the show. However, this crowd was not vocal at all. I found myself on the side of the room screaming and clapping in efforts to make noise for the queens. Due to the lack of vocalization, I noticed that Eric seemed to be almost heckling and shaming the crowd for not appreciating the performers. I also caught myself saying that the crowd was “a tough crowd” or “being disrespectful”. From my summer of doing research on drag shows, I had a bias of what a crowd who is engaged is supposed to look like. Screaming, hollering, cheering, clapping and tipping are signs of engagement from the crowd. There seemed to be little to none of this for most of the night. It was mostly the older people from the community that were doing the tipping. David was sitting close to me; he constantly clapped and sang along with the songs. I saw Donna giving tips.

The second thing I noticed, that I am sure many people noticed, was the 40-year-old man who was wearing a plaid shirt. He would go up to the queens but use the exchange of money to have a conversation or physically interact with them. At the beginning of the night, this seemed to be innocent, like he knew the queens. However, as the night went on, he started hanging onto

the queens. The queens tried to avoid or get rid of him. He was drunk. Queens started avoiding that area of the floor space and twirled away when he approached him during their performance. I often wondered about their safety and thought about telling someone — the queens looked uncomfortable. I thought about the fact that this was an LGBTQ space and that there was no effort to have some kind of security that could get this man removed from the place. I also noted the fact that Rick or Eric or someone else did not appear concerned about this man, which made me wonder if the queens dealt with this a lot, making it normal. Eventually, the man was escorted out, but that happened way later than it should have.

Additionally, during the show, the balloons that were on the floor were being popped, which made noises over the music. As someone who has grown up in a mass shooting United States, each time a balloon was popped, I was startled and looked around. No one else seemed to be bothered except for my classmates around me. We both had to continuously remind ourselves that the noise was a balloon. This also reflected a safety concern. At any point someone could come in with a gun and shoot us all. There seemed to be no thought of safety because there was no security for the space. I also noticed this on Saturday.

### **Closing**

I noticed the crowd dying down around 10:20-10:40. By the end of the show, there were only the people at the tables. I went to help take down the exhibit around 10:40. Again, this was a collaborate effort of people from Oxford. By this point, the audience had lessened to only about 30 people. When I walked over to Hooper, who was helping take the exhibit down, Dr. Wilkerson asked if we should give Eric and PJ their framed ethnographic poems. Hooper and I both agreed that it would be a great idea and an act that would show how thankful we are for those who are participating. Hooper was able to give PJ theirs at the table they were sitting at.

For me, finding Eric proved difficult. Since the show was still going on, I could only hear Eric announcing the performers. I did not want to go backstage while performers were getting ready to go on stage. I waited for a few numbers until Eric came out to give his last performance. I thought that it would be a cool for me to give it to him while he was performing. However, I decided that I should wait until the end of his performance so he would not have to carry around a plaque the entire time. When I heard the song coming to a close, I walked to the center of the room where Eric was picking up the last of his tips. When he turned around, I handed him the plaque. Eric appeared excited and asked if he could keep it. I said yes, of course, thank you for being interviewed. He gave me a hug and said, "Thank you darling." I told Eric I would see him on Saturday. With that, he kissed me on the cheek and proceeded to walk back to the stage.

After the plaque was given, Hooper, my girlfriend and I got the rest of our stuff and proceeded to my car. The air was cold and my voice was hoarse. We talked about what we were going to wear tomorrow since it was supposed to be cold. I noticed fewer cars in the parking lot and a quiet lull in the conversation.

### **Conversation in the Car**

Hooper, my girlfriend and I talked about the drag show in the car. I expressed my frustration with the crowd not being vocal. I have a viewpoint that audience members should be cheering for the performers. If they do not, I feel as though it is disrespectful to the performers. We talked about how socializing was limited at the event. Hooper pointed out that at a three-hour-long drag show, there could be breaks between performances so that people could talk and socialize.

## **Tupelo Pride Drag Show, Fieldnotes October 11, 2019**

**What:** Tupelo Pride drag show and kick-off event

**Where:** The Link Centre, Tupelo, Mississippi

**When:** Friday, October 11, 2019

**Time of arrival and departure:** 6:45-10:30 p.m.

**Student Researcher:** Pace Ward

Pulling into the parking lot of the Link Centre, the first thing that stands out to me is that this building was obviously a church before. I had heard this from one of my classmates about the space. There were quite a few cars in the parking lot when we pulled up. My classmates and I all agreed to drive around the building once to check out the space. As we drove around the back of the building, I saw a couple of older-looking white people entering the building. They were wearing t shirts and blue jeans. One classmate sounded a little nervous, "I think we may be a little overdressed." It's true, we had all dressed up for the event. Another reassured the car, however, that we would be fine, "It's Pride," we could dress however we wanted to with no need to fear judgment.

We pull into a parking spot to one side of the Link Centre and decide to listen to some music before heading into the building, since we had arrived with about ten or fifteen minutes to spare before the time listed for "doors." Before entering, we see a white sedan with a local news channel's logo on the side, WTVA. We walk around to the back of the brick building, past two dumpsters. Along the back of the building is a sidewalk, with an awning that covers the space in front of two sets of glass double doors. We enter the doors into a small lobby area. To the left is a plastic folding table set up with wristbands, a money box, and a couple of sheets of paper. Two white men who look to be in their late twenties or early thirties are seated there.

To the right are three poster boards with information about the IHP (Invisible Histories Project) on them. They have informational phrases on them asking questions along the lines of ‘what do we collect?’ surrounded with pictures as examples. The group of us queues up behind a few of the other attendees waiting to be admitted into the event. One of them, an older-looking woman with short gray hair, a red button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up and tucked into blue jeans, overhears us asking about whether or not this is the line to get in. She turns around, with a smile, and tells us it is.

We begin to chat with her about the event, and she tells us that she’s excited for it, and that she had been to last year’s. We inform her that we’re visiting from the University of Mississippi and, hearing that we had travelled, began to tell us about other events that are coming up in the area. She tells that there will be a masquerade party in Starkville on the weekend of Halloween, and a drag pageant in Columbus the following night. A white man, younger, with a light brown beard who is wearing a pink t shirt that matches that of the man in front of him in line, turns and asks her if she has the date right. They don’t seem to come to an agreement, but they know that both of the events are the weekend following Halloween. We ask her if she’ll be going to the event and she excitedly tells us that of course she will be. “I got fitted for my tux yesterday.” She also tells us that the mask she ordered is in a box in the mail right now.

It was around this time that they began letting people into the main event area. I could see into the room from the foyer we were standing in. There were many tables set up, including one for the IHP. As we were passing through the line, we were all discussing whether or not we could remember if we had been paid for or not to get into the event. Dr. McDowell eventually came to notify the white men at the table that she was going to pay for our cover charges. We all

passed through the line, showing our IDs to the men and getting blue wristbands. After I got my wristband, I entered the main event area.

There was one table for the IHP set up and facing the entrance into the main area. At a right angle from that table were three or four tables set up facing the open space of where the event would be taking place. I saw that the IHP had a few things on display on the surface of the table, along with information in the form of pamphlets and miniature flyers that were free for people to pick up and take. They also had a bowl full of candy and cupcakes available for people to take freely. Given my interest in the project due to personal ties with those involved, I immediately approached the table.

There was a white man who appeared to be in his late thirties or forties seated at the table. My friend Hooper was standing behind him, and he introduced us. The man's name is Josh, and he gave me a rundown of the things that were on display on the table. I remember that there was a flyer advertising a lesbian bookstore--the first of its kind in Mississippi, if I'm not mistaken--that was based out of Ocean Springs. Josh informed me that they had a discreet shipping system in place, where they would send you books to your house wrapped in brown paper with only your initials on it. After looking at what was on display on the table, I began to make my way around the LPs and oral history excerpts that were hanging on the wall in the corner. I had been very interested in checking out DJ Prince Charles's records. I also remember being deeply moved by the excerpt from the interview with PJ, wherein the interviewee described growing up religious and being a lesbian.

After looking around at the exhibit, I saw my friends Maddie and Kayla. I gave Maddie a big hug and told her that I am very proud to be her friend knowing about her involvement with the Invisible Histories Project. Kayla and I chatted about the weekend ahead, and her and

Maddie's plans for the parade the following day. I then decided to make my way around and see what the other vendors had on display.

I passed a table with a sign describing how much VIP passes would cost for the entire weekend's events, and what all a VIP pass would include. As I was reading a sign, the two white women who were sitting at the table asked me if I was interested in buying anything. I told them that, unfortunately, I did not have the money at the moment. I asked them their names and they introduced themselves to me: Terry and Jen. I asked them how this weekend is going to compare to last year's Tupelo Pride. They described last year's event as "last minute," and kind of unorganized and thrown together. They explained that they only expected about a hundred attendees, but that three or four hundred people ended up showing up. However, they didn't have any sponsors or vendors last year, like they do this year.

Terry tells me that she works for Toyota, and that Toyota is the main sponsor for this year's festivities. They have an older model Corolla, as well as a brand-new model that they would have on display at the parade tomorrow. Terry also tells me that they have a relatively new model (not the latest) that they would be giving away in a raffle. Aside from that, they have 27 vendors, as well as "live music and some drag shows" planned for this year. I gathered that this year's event had a lot more time for planning and a lot more support from other organizations and businesses.

After talking with Jen and Terry, I make my way to the next table, which had many Tupelo Pride 2019 t shirts on display. I glanced at the design of the shirt, and the woman who was seated at the table called to me. "Beautiful shirts! They're only twenty dollars." Bashfully, I explained again that I don't really have the money, but that I wished I could buy one. As I moved past that table, I noticed that the last table that was set up was a cash bar. After getting a good

look at all of the tables, I made my way back over to my friends Maddie and Kayla to chat with them for a bit.

I then noticed that there was more to the IHP exhibit than I had initially noticed. There was butcher paper hung up on the wall with various questions that people were filling in their responses to. One of them asked us to share the first place where we remember spending time with and getting to know LGBTQ+ people. I thought for a while about the first place I could remember, but couldn't think of the exact place at first. There was another sheet that asked for people to share what they remember about DJ Prince Charles. The third one asked people to write how they identify. I remember wanting to contribute, for the sake of contribution itself, but didn't know how to respond. Writing "straight" felt tactless. However, I did remember that the first place I remember really getting to know gay and lesbian individuals, and spending quality time with them, was at the Cats Purring Dude Ranch when I was around 18 or 19 years old, so I added that to the first piece of butcher paper.

A friend of mine from UM approached as I was writing my entry on the butcher paper. Knowing that he is from DeSoto County like me, I pointed out that someone had added Latimer Lakes Park in Horn Lake to the page. We both laughed over this, and he told me that he's actually had sex there before. I tell him that that's interesting because I used to skate there in high school and never knew it as a place where LGBTQ+ people would come together.

Around that time, Godiva Holiday, the announcer and one of the performers for the drag show, took the floor and gave a brief announcement. When she turned on the microphone, it fed back with the speakers. "That was my vagina," she joked, "You're welcome." A lot of the people in the room laughed at this. She makes her way across the main event space to the IHP's display. She begins describing what the Invisible Histories Project does, before handing the microphone

over to another one of the coordinators of the project. She begins to explain the project in a little more depth. Specifically, I remember her joking about how they collect “oral histories,” which received laughs from the crowd as well. Godiva gets the microphone back and describes what’s on display on the walls. She specifically points out that one of the oral history excerpts is from her own interview, wherein she “almost killed [her] preacher.” She makes her way back to the stage and announces that IHP would be able to give their presentation in about ten minutes or so. I take this opportunity to head outside for a cigarette and to type brief jottings on my phone about what I had seen so far.

When I exit the building out of the front doors, I see only one other person standing outside. An older white woman, (I was later informed that she is in her seventies) with buzzed gray hair and wearing a t shirt tucked into blue jeans and jacket, standing by herself and smoking. I introduce myself to her, and she shakes my hand, introducing herself as Stacey. I ask if her if this is first time coming to Tupelo Pride, and she told me that she came last year, but it was much smaller. I explain to her that I’m here from the University of Mississippi, and that I’m conducting participant observations for a class. She seems interested and happy to talk with me. She tells me that she grew up right outside of Tupelo and has lived in the area her whole life. I ask her if she ever went to Rumors in the past, but she had never heard of it. She hasn’t heard of Crossroads before either. I explain the reason that I’m asking--we had just watched a documentary about the two bars in class a couple of weeks ago called *Small Town Gay Bar*. She tells me that she had heard of a bar that existed “out in a field,” outside of Tupelo, “way back,” in Shannon, Mississippi.

Stacy begins to describe to me why Pride is so important to her. American politics have made things different, she said. When she was younger, there was a “secret gay life.” If you were

gay, she tells me, you didn't talk about it, ever. There was a whole language, an underground community, that other LGBTQ+ people abided by. She tells me that she likes how it is now. The way she sees it, "if they don't like it, that's their problem." I ask her if she thinks it's still that easy, with Trump in office and everything. She tells me that there's so much momentum now, that people's voices are so loud, that she can still hold that same attitude.

Around this time, three white men approach us. I remember feeling apprehensive as they approached. These men reminded me of farmers I know in Arkansas — In other words, they reminded me of typical conservative Southern white men. However, they greeted Stacy with smiles and spoke with her as if they had known her for a long time. Two of them introduce the third to her, and she holds her arms out for a hug, explaining that she's "a hugger." He says he is, too. When these men go back inside, she tells me she's going to head inside as well. I ask her to remind me her name one more time. I begin to reach my hand out to shake, before remembering what she said. "You said you're a hugger, can we hug?" We hug each other, and as she's walking inside, she says, "You're Pace..?" I let her know that that's correct. I remember that after she went inside, I questioned whether or not it was appropriate to ask to hug her, and hoped that I did not make her feel uncomfortable.

When I went back inside, the drag show was about to start. Before the show starts, I mention that I'm feeling thirsty, and Tricia lets me know that the non-alcoholic drinks are free. Hearing this, I approach the cash bar. There is a young white man, who looks to be around my age, standing behind the table. I lean in to ask him if the waters and sodas are free--just to make sure that it's true before helping myself to a drink--and he confirms. I tell him that he looks familiar and ask him if he's from around Oxford. He says he is, and I tell him that I recognize him from around town. We introduce ourselves by name and then he asks if I go to a lot of the

Code Pink events in Oxford. I have only been to a couple of the dance parties and that I worry about imposing on the space since I'm mostly straight. I ask him how this event is similar or different to Code Pink events, and he tells me that the Code Pink events are a lot more crowded. He suggests that I go to the events, especially the ones at Proud Larry's. They're smaller and more intimate, but also more crowded and fun. I tell him that I'll be sure to keep that in mind next time a Code Pink event rolls around. We part ways and I go find a seat next to my friends.

As I take a seat, Godiva announces that the show is about to begin: "Hallelujah! Allahu Akbar!" She begins to list the lineup for performers. I tried to record all of the names of all of the performers, but this was difficult for a couple of reasons. One, Godiva was moving through the names of the performers fairly quickly. Also, between the microphone and others talking amongst themselves, it wasn't easy to hear Godiva clearly, and due to my lack of prior knowledge about any of the performers, I couldn't do a very good job of 'filling in the blanks' whenever I couldn't quite hear the name that Godiva announced.

I do remember a few of the performers, though, such as Dee Pression Holiday, Mia Chambers, Freak Nasty, and Kiara Mason. After listing off all of the performers, Godiva lets us know that, while Alicia was supposed to be performing tonight, she has a sick dog at home so she won't be here. Godiva goes back on this, however, and explains that she may surprise us later on, but that no one is exactly sure whether or not that will happen. I remember being disappointed by this, because I was really interested in seeing what Alicia's performance would be like, since she was one of the main players in the *Small Town Gay Bar* documentary.

After listing off the names of the performers, Godiva acknowledges the "Brown family" at one of the reserved tables directly in front of the stage. They seem important, since Godiva is

addressing them directly: “His name is my name, too...” she seems, somewhat sarcastically. I don’t get the joke, but a few people do laugh.

Following this, Godiva announces that Rick Gladish is going to be the DJ tonight, and she asks him if he’s ready. She then announces that the first performance is going to be from her drag house, the Holidays. The performance begins and the mood of the room is a little...awkward. There aren’t too many people cheering, and almost everyone is seated.

I expected there to be a lot of tipping, but I don’t see much of it happening. I wonder if this has anything to do with the bulk of the floor space being taken up with reserved tables. This arrangement of the space seems to discourage people from getting up and dancing, and instead remaining seated. Maddie also points out to me that not enough people are cheering, and that this is a little disrespectful to the performers.

Between each performer, Godiva makes a lot of jokes. Sometimes, she’ll invite other people who are in attendance to the event up onto the stage. Even early on in the event, she seems to be getting frustrated with the lack of response the audience gives her, whether it be responses to her jokes, or simply applause for the upcoming performance. She reflects her frustration at one point: “This is not a dentist’s office. I am not pulling teeth.” Usually, following comments after this, the response from the crowd will become seemingly more appropriate, but it seems only to be due to Godiva’s prompting.

After one of the drag queens’ performance, Godiva calls a couple up onto the stage: Yolanda and Gia. Godiva announces that they’re celebrating five years together. Godiva makes a joke that this is unheard of for lesbians, and refers to getting a “Uhaul,” to suggest her belief that lesbians have a tendency to move into and out of relationships hastily, from what I understand. After Godiva finishes making jokes, however, she does prompt everyone to applaud the couple

for staying together. As the show goes on, I notice that there still aren't so many cheers from the audience, generally. In fact, most of the cheers I hear come from the group of Religion, Gender, and Sexuality classmates that I'm standing with. One of my classmates jokes that she wants to "buy everyone shots" to try to get the audience to loosen up.

One of the queens earned the title "Miss Pegasus," and I remember being very impressed by her performance. Another thing about her performance stands out to me, though. I see one white man in a gray t shirt standing by one of the reserved tables, waiting to tip Miss Pegasus. While he's standing there, a taller white man in a red button down shirt with the sleeves cut off, and blue jeans with a lot of large holes in them and cowboy boots, comes up behind the man in the gray t shirt, places his arms around him, and reaches his arms out to attempt to tip Miss Pegasus. At first, I thought that they may know each other, even that they may be romantically involved. However, the way that the man in the gray t shirt steps away from the taller man after tipping the performer suggests to me that they don't actually know each other.

The taller man remains standing, watching the performer. He begins following behind the performer, seeming to be almost in a trance. Maddie points this out to me, especially when the performer ignores the man's reaching hands and his tip. Maddie describes this to me as the tall man "getting swerved" by the performer. I understand this as similar to being 'rejected.' However, the tall man seems persistent. This man consistently stood and followed performers around during their performances. After the first few performers to whom he did this to, it appeared that he didn't have money for tipping but still kept following them around. He merely seemed to be attempting to hit on the performers while they were performing. My classmates and I would point this out to one another every time it happened, commenting on how creepy and concerning it was. He would grope performers, thwart them in their routine, and put his arms

around them and bury his head in their chests. They always looked a little puzzled as they attempted to politely navigate the situation. My classmates and I were wondering where the security guards were, and why no one was taking care of this. Finally, close to the end of the event, the man was escorted out by two women, one of whom seemed to be security.

Following Miss Pegasus's performance, I step outside for another smoke. There are more people out here than last time I came out. I see my classmates and ask how their experience is so far. They tell me that they're having a good time, but that they wish people were "partying," and "dancing," more. Somehow or another, one of my classmates heard a white man who was standing sort of nearby, but not that close, mention spending time in Memphis. She calls out to him and asks if he lives in Memphis. He approaches us, and tells us no, but he travels to Memphis every weekend. The man is very large--he's tall and burly. He's wearing a blue button-down tucked into jeans. His head is shaved to the skin and he has a thick brown beard. He introduces himself to us as Mitchel. He asks where we're from, and when Mitchel learns that one of us is from New Orleans, he starts to describe all of the places that he hangs out at in New Orleans. Mitchel lives in Bruce, Mississippi, but he travels to Memphis every weekend because he is a member of a leather and fetish club called "Hoist." He hands us a business card. The logo stands out to me, because it incorporates an eagle that seems derivative of the *Parteiadler* of Nazi Germany. Mitchel also begins describing to us the various nonprofits he works with and knows of that are designed for aiding LGBTQ+ youth. After a while, Mitchel says he's getting cold and goes back into the building. We aren't far behind him.

When we re-entered the building, there were noticeably less people in the main event area. But the performance that stands out to me the most from the whole night was about to be underway. Godiva announces Mia Chambers, the next performer. Her performance is different

from the rest of the performances I had seen up to that point. The score isn't simply music, but rather music spliced between audio clips from various movie scenes. Chambers had memorized all of the cues, knowing when to switch between 'acting' and 'singing' in her performance. It was breathtaking. I also recall that she refused to accept tips during her performance; she seemed much more focused on the integrity of the performance itself than the money she would make from it. That said, after her performance, Godiva announces as Chambers is exiting the stage that she had just donated thirty-something dollars to Tupelo Pride — presumably this is about how much money she had made from tips for that performance.

Later in the event, Godiva invited a representative from Pure Romance to the stage, to announce that they support Pride. At one point, Godiva invites a man who was tipping her to come up closer to the stage. She must have kissed him on the cheek, or something along those lines, because I could hear that he commented something to her as she was walking away from him. After he said something, Godiva responded into the microphone: "I'm a lady, I don't have facial hair."

It was getting close to 10:30 when most of the audience had seemed to leave. My classmates and I decided to leave as well. I approached Dr. McDowell, who was helping break down the IHP exhibit and table, to ask her if it would be okay to leave before the event ended. She assured me that it was fine. It wasn't long after that the rest of our classmates came outside. We all chatted briefly about who was coming back to Tupelo tomorrow, who was riding with whom, etc. As we all walked in a group back to the parking lot, Dr. McDowell pulls up in front of us with her window down. "Yeah!! RGS," she yells, joking with us. We all laugh and joke back with her. She tells us "Look out for deer and people coming home from football games." We all tell her we will be safe and head our separate ways to come back to Oxford.

## **Tupelo Pride Drag Show, Fieldnotes October 11, 2019**

**What:** Tupelo Pride drag show and kick-off event

**Where:** The Link Centre, Tupelo, Mississippi

**Date:** Friday, October 11, 2019

**Time of arrival and departure:** 6:45-10:30 p.m.

**Student Researcher:** Name Omitted

Arriving at the venue for the pride kickoff event ten minutes before the doors were set to open, I noticed that the parking lot had many empty spaces and chose to park in a space several cars away from what I thought was the entrance. The event was being held in a large event center located near various stores and restaurants on the small town's main street, which I have been to in the past for other events. I noticed that a car with a sign for the local news station plastered across the side pulled up behind me, parking even further away than I did, but whoever was inside of the car did not get out.

My classmates had carpooled to the event, but since I live in the town where the event was being held, I had driven alone. I texted my classmates to ask if anyone else was already there. I did not want to go in alone because I had never been to an event like this before, and was somewhat nervous, so when my classmates responded saying they were there, I met them at their car and we decided to go ahead inside to wait for the event to begin. I walked to what I thought was the entrance, as I have been to this event center before and that was the entrance I have always used, but when we approached it we noticed signs on the door for a music class. One of my classmates mentioned he had seen people walking around the back of the building, so we headed in that direction to see if we could find the entrance. We walked past two dumpsters and down a small side-drive used for cars to get to the main parking lot before spotting people

entering a set of doors. There was a person standing outside the doors, and signs for Tupelo Pride on the door, so we knew we had arrived at the right place as we approached.

Walking through the glass doors, we entered a foyer. The space had bathrooms to the left and poster boards for the Invisible Histories Project to the right. We could not get close enough to look at the posters yet because the line of people waiting to enter the room that the event was being held in stretched to the doors we had just entered through. Although the line reached the doors, there were only around twelve people waiting in front of us, as the room the event was being held in was near the entrance. While waiting in the line, we talked to one of the women waiting in front of us. She looked to be in her sixties, wearing a long-sleeved button up shirt and jeans. One of my classmates asked her if she had been to one of these events before, and she (along with two men in front of her that were both wearing pink t-shirts with one of the drag queen's pictures on it) told us that they love going to drag shows. They mentioned that sometime last month there was one close-by, and there would be a few more coming up soon. The way they talked about the events made it seem like they were local, but when asked where the upcoming events would be held, the woman we were speaking to mentioned towns that are nearing two hours away, meaning local people who enjoy going to drag shows usually have to travel if they would like to attend one. My classmate asked her where she is from, and she said that she grew up in a small town in north Alabama. As we continued making small talk, she asked us to invite our friends next time there is an event like this, so that we can have more events of the sort in this town.

As we proceeded through the line, I was able to see the Invisible History Project poster boards more clearly. They showed various LGBTQ+ happenings in the south, tracking the history of the community in the area. Looking at the boards, I thought about the things we had

read about the history of the LGBTQ+ community in the south through *Men Like That*. I found the boards to be interesting considering the silence around the community in that book and how being gay, or a man who likes men, seemed to be a very secretive thing. In the book, John Howard called Mississippi the closet of the south, but the boards at this event provided a different perspective on the community.

My classmates and I turned a corner in the line, nearing the room where the pride committee was holding the event, and showed our ID's to one of the people at the table where they were providing wristbands so people could drink. The entrance fee was \$10 for those under 21 and \$5 for those over 21. They did not mention what the entrance fee would be used for, I imagine they could have been for charges to use the building or for the pride festivities taking place the next day.

The kickoff party took place in one room. Although the room was not too large it had plenty of room for everyone in attendance, which at most neared 200 people, to sit or stand comfortably. Upbeat music played over the speakers, blurring the conversations of attendees that had arrived early and were talking amongst themselves. Since there were no more than 50 people in the room at this point, I was able to see the decorations spread across the room clearly. Along the left wall adjacent to the door we had just entered, there were large posters with questions at the top and markers tied to them so attendees could write their answers. These questions included "What are some meeting places you remember for LGBTQ+ people in Mississippi?" People had already made use of these posters, and there were a few answers under each.

Anyone could walk into this room and know that they were at a pride event. There were pride flags all along the walls, mostly close to the front of the room, with one hanging on the wall in the center of the stage where the drag performers would later stand. Along the right wall,

there was a large flag with the phrase “Born This Way” written in a rainbow font. There were also rainbow-colored lights projected on the walls, to emphasize that not only was this a party, it was a party to celebrate pride. Balloons in all colors of the rainbow were spread across the floor, and even the tables in the center of the room were covered with rainbow-colored tablecloths. On these round tables, there were signs that said “reserved” as well as rainbow glow-sticks. There were a few people sitting at these tables, and there were a few people sitting on chairs that lined either side of the wall. These people seemed to be just observing, rather than getting involved and talking to other people that were there.

I turned towards the back of the room where there was a line of tables set up. On the left, there was a bar station where attendees could get drinks. On the right side, I saw rainbow cupcakes in the shape of a pride flag placed on one of the tables. Walking to the end of the tables, I faced the door I had entered through and noticed frames were hung along the wall on the left side of the door. The frames contained narratives that had been collected from local LGBTQ+ oral history interviews. One talked about the fear of coming out in Mississippi. The person had mentioned that when they were considering coming out, being LGBTQ+ was much less accepted than it is now. They spoke about how they knew of famous people that had come out, such as Ellen and Elton John, but those people had “money and celebrity,” of course they were okay – “But what would happen to us?”

The next story talked about hope for Mississippi to change. This caused me to reflect again on *Men Like That*. Although many members of the LGBTQ+ community are very involved in that community, they are also a part and product of their town community. The expectation that people will move out of rural communities when they come out can be harmful to small towns, such as the one the event was being held in. Small towns do not change of their own

volition, they change because people fight for them to change and they make themselves visible. Another of the stories was about the first time someone dressed up in drag. Their mother had allowed them to do so, but they were afraid of what their father would think. There were also many covers of music records decorating the walls between these stories, which I realized as we had spoken about it in class were likely records from DJ Charles Smith's collection, who was a DJ for gay bars in Mississippi.

After making my way around the room, I went to stand with a few of my classmates who were talking to a girl from a different class that we share. She introduced us to her friends, and we talked about the Invisible Histories Project. She told us that she is involved with the project through her professor, with whom she had attended, glancing towards the back of the room. As I looked to the back, I noticed the large IHP sign above the table where her professor was standing. As we were speaking, I noticed a man with a camera walk into the room. He placed the camera on a camera-stand close to the door and panned the back half of the room. I assumed he was from the news crew judging from the car I had noticed outside earlier that evening, but he did not have anything labelling him as such. After speaking for a few more moments with my classmate, she told us she was going to sit down in the chairs along the walls and asked if we would like to join, so I followed her to sit down on the left side of the room.

While sitting and waiting for the program to begin, more people began to arrive. At this point, there were maybe a little over 100 people at the kickoff party. I watched their interactions as I waited. I noticed that although people stood and talked in small circles, these circles were made up of two distinct groups, which became increasingly clear as the night went on. One of the groups was the older generation of LGBTQ+ people. I noticed this group after observing that one of the round tables in front of me was filled entirely with older men, some of

whom I watched get up to go speak to other older men. This group tended to congregate with each other and consisted of those 50 and older. They were mainly dressed in casual clothes, with many people wearing either button-up shirts or t-shirts with blue jeans. As more members of this group entered, I watched them greet each other. They greeted each other how one might greet their family at a holiday event, or their friends they have not seen in a long time. It was not like a group coming together, it was like a family coming *back* together. People hugged each other, kissed each other's cheeks, and caught up with each other while smiling and laughing. The other distinct group was the younger generation of the LGBTQ+ community. This group ranged from people who looked to be around 16 to people in their 30's. Although they, too, congregated together many of them arrived together as well. They seemed to be a more closed-off group, mainly talking to those with whom they had attended. Some of the things I observed the younger generation wearing included one person wearing ropes as a shirt, one person wearing a rainbow unicorn headband, and one person wearing a large white tutu with rainbow colors showing underneath – this person also had their hair partly shaved, with the shaved part dyed rainbow. I did notice that the majority of people in both groups were white, as well as the organizers. However, I did see a few people of color as well.

At 7:30, three people entered the stage in the center of the room to talk about the Invisible Histories Project. After introducing themselves, the older woman spoke about how she had been interviewed for the project, stating that her interviewer, who was also on the stage, had made her feel extremely comfortable during their interview, and that she “talked about things I haven't thought about in years.” She encouraged others in the crowd to be interviewed for the project, sharing that it was a great experience and a good opportunity to reminisce. After she spoke, she passed the microphone to my classmate, Maddie, who was standing to her right. Maddie shared

about the Invisible Histories Project, mentioning that they had recently obtained DJ Charles Smith's record collection. As they finished speaking about the project, they made their way off the stage and the crowd resumed waiting for the drag show, which was set to begin at 8:00pm. The room started to fill. Many people were now sitting at the tables in the middle of the room and the chairs along the walls on either side were full. The majority of people had gotten drinks by this time and were laughing and chatting with each other. Several of the drag queens that would be performing later made their way through the crowd, stopping at different tables to say hi to people they knew and catch up. I talked to my classmate, asking "do you know when they started doing work with the Invisible Histories Project?" She responded, saying "I think there are other Invisible History Projects other places, but from what I know I think the one here was started sometime last year." As we continued talking, I asked her if she went to Tupelo pride last year. "I didn't, did you?" she asked. I told her "I didn't either. I honestly didn't even know that we had one here last year."

As it neared 8:00, the drag queen, Godiva, that was both a performer and the event host for the night made her way through the crowd, her voice projecting through the speakers as she asked the crowd if they were excited. When the attendees did not respond enthusiastically enough, she continued asking until she was satisfied with their response. As she approached the back of the room, standing to the left of the Invisible Histories Project table, she encouraged people to go look at the stories framed on the walls by the Invisible Histories Project. Pointing to the story about dressing in drag for the first time, she stated that this was her own story. Making her way back to the stage, she announced who would be performing during the drag show. She stated that one of the performers, Alicia, sadly could not make it, asking the audience to "Please pray for Alicia, she has a very sick dog." Since Alicia would not be there, there were 11

performers for the night. The host told the crowd to “grab your drinks and get comfortable,” since the show was about to start. I noticed throughout the show that she was a very engaging, funny host. She continuously made jokes, spoke directly to the crowd, and proposed many times for the crowd to raise their glasses in a toast.

When the drag show was set to start, the DJ could not get the music to play, so Godiva engaged the audience, asking people “Who’s ready to party in the park tomorrow?” to which everyone cheered. She continued to speak about the pride event, mentioning that Toyota was sponsoring it and thanking them for their contribution. Once the DJ finally got the music to play, the show began. Three of the drag queens opened the show performing “Don’t Call Me Angel” by Ariana Grande, Miley Cyrus, and Lana Del Rey. Although the crowd was not fully engaged through the song, they erupted in cheers when one of the queens did the splits and they clapped as the song ended.

After this performance, one of the drag queens performed Behind These Hazel Eyes. I noticed many people around me singing along, but they remained only partially engaged. Many people were not tipping the queens yet. The host returned to the stage after the performance, engaging the audience again by announcing the next performer. After this announcement, she told the crowd they could cheer better than that, saying “Come on, we are not going to be doing this all night. I am not pulling teeth – we are here to have a good time!” To which the crowd responded by cheering louder. After this statement, the attendees became much more engaged in the show. During the next performance, people cheered loudly and tipped the drag queen as she danced her way through the crowd. Attendees became increasingly engaged through her performance, erupting in cheers as it ended.

The next performer to enter the stage performed a Beyoncé medley. She seemed to enjoy performing and was very engaged with the crowd. As her performance ended, my classmate leaned over to me and said, “I think me and my roommate are going to head out, my mom is in town.” I told her I would see her in class and moved seats to sit next to my other classmates. As I did this, two people who came for the show asked if they could take the seats left open, since all the seats lining the room were full. I told them that was fine, and they took their seats next to me. The host announced the next performer, stating that she is the reigning Miss Oxford Pride, to which everyone cheered. Although she performed a slow song, the crowd remained engaged and cheered for her as the song ended. Godiva spoke again after this performance, stating that the drag queen had been nervous about performing a slow song because she had been having back problems the past week, saying “but she did it and ya’ll loved it – it was worth it!” Godiva talked about how drag queens go through many difficult things behind the scenes that the crowd does not see.

The next performer appeared to be older than the previous drag queens that had performed, and she wore a large crown atop her head as she sang Castle by Halsey. She moved slowly through the crowd and her performance was more focused on acting along with the lyrics and maintaining her facial expressions rather than dancing. As the show went on, I noticed this trend with the performers. Although each performer had their own style, the older and younger performers seemed to be focused on different aspects of drag performances.

As the host announced the next performer, she said “This is my drag daughter, and I love her.” The queen was the youngest performer of the night and shared a last drag-name with the host. Through her performance, she lost her balance, slightly slipping a few times but remaining very professional and continuing with her performance. Many people gave her tips and the

crowd cheered loudly each time she did a trick. The next drag queen performed an Ariana Grande medley, which the crowd clapped along to, cheering throughout her performance. She interacted with the crowd, dancing with guests. After this performance, the next drag queen entered the stage to start her performance, which began with a monologue meant to lead up to “The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia.” However, a few moments through the monologue the speakers cut out, and the queen ran off the stage. The host of the show spoke during this break, asking the performer to start from the beginning of her performance as she returned to the stage, so the crowd could see it in its entirety. Regardless of the slight mishap she had, the crowd loved the monologue and her entire performance, cheering at many points throughout. Many people gave her tips, and I noticed other drag queens tipping her as well.

Once her performance ended, the host announced that the next performer was the reigning Miss Tupelo Pride. The crowd cheered loudly at this announcement, excited over both the event of pride and at the idea that this drag queen is part of the town in which many of them live. I noticed this theme throughout, with people cheering loudly when Tupelo was mentioned. The drag queen’s performance was in a different style than the other performers, and she did not receive many tips at first. Other drag queens began offering her tips, seemingly trying to prompt other people to tip her as well.

At this point, my classmates that were sitting next to me got up and people that had been standing along the walls nearby sat in their places. I noticed that during the next queen’s performance, she used a rainbow flag as a prop. At one point, she opened the flag on the stage and the crowd cheered when they saw the rainbow, a sign of pride, displayed on the stage. The next performer entered the stage wearing a dress that shimmered gold, and her hair and makeup resembled an old Hollywood starlet. Her performance interwove both a monologue and

slow music. Rather than making her way through the crowd as the other performers had done, she remained center-stage for her entire performance. Because she did not receive tips walking through the crowd as the other performers had done, people from the crowd continuously walked up to the stage throughout the performance to give her tips. She did not dance during her performance, nor was she heavily focused on singing. Instead, she focused on acting through the monologue. Although her focus was in this area, the crowd remained captured and engaged through the entire performance. She seamlessly received her tips, never missing a beat while performing, which displayed her high level of professionalism. As her performance came to a close, the crowd erupted with clapping and cheers. Godiva spoke again, voice coming through the speakers as she said “In case y’all haven’t been paying attention... THAT is drag.” The crowd cheered louder. As her performance ended, she walked off the stage, leaving all of the money she had earned in tips behind. The host said “Girl, come get your money!” but the performer waved her off, leaving it all behind. The host said “Y’all, [Mia Chambers] just donated about thirty dollars to Tupelo pride.” Everyone in the crowd cheered again at this, excited over the donation.

The host was the next performer in what I thought was the finale of the show, although several performers returned to the stage after her. As she made her way on stage, she shared that she would be dedicating the performance to her friend that had just recently moved back to Mississippi and the crowd cheered. She performed Sweet Dreams, and most of the crowd sang along. This solidified a thought I had earlier in the performances.

When the songs performed were newer songs, the majority of people watched the performers rather than singing along. However, when older songs were performed the vast majority of the crowd sang through the performance, which is a testament to the age

demographics of the crowd. The host was very engaging through her performance and went around to the tables and people in the crowd, dancing with them. It was clear everyone was enjoying themselves through this performance, tipping her as she went along. As she neared the end of her performance, she threw her tip money in the air and the crowd cheered. After her performance, she returned to the stage and called someone up to meet her on the stage. She had borrowed the person's fur coat as she walked through the crowd and was returning it. Showing the coat to the crowd, the host said, "That's pride fabulous, y'all!"

After this exchange, a woman that was sitting near me walked up to the stage to speak to the host. They talked to each other for a moment and Godiva asked the woman to say something to the crowd. She introduced herself and shared that she was part of a company, stating "We're Pure Romance, and we support pride!" The crowd cheered and the host addressed the crowd, saying "Did y'all hear that?" Turning back to the woman, the host told her to "Say it again!" "We support pride!" The crowd erupted in applause and shouts. I imagine that in such a small town situated in the Bible Belt it is not often that the LGBTQ+ community receives public shows of support by companies.

At this point, I decided to move to the chairs on the right side of the room almost directly across from where I had been sitting. Some of my classmates were sitting in this area and I wanted to get a different viewpoint on the show and the crowd, as it was getting later and many people had left. One of the next performers sang a P!nk song, and the younger half of the crowd sang along. As this performer closed out the song, one of the men in the crowd who had been going up to the performers throughout the show walked up behind her and held onto her. I had seen this man going up to the other performers, at first thinking that he might know them, as many other people in the crowd seemed to and the majority of the drag queens had not shown

signs of being uncomfortable. However, now he would not let go of the performer and she did look uncomfortable, having to physically remove his hands so she could walk behind the stage curtains. I realized at this point that although this man may have made the other performers uncomfortable as well.

As the event wound down, some of my classmates walked over to where the Invisible Histories Project had set up, helping to take down their decorations, so I went over to see if they needed any more help. They told me that it had mostly been taken care of, so I spoke to one of the boys that was standing near me, asking about his experience and if he had enjoyed his time at the kickoff event. He said, “Not at first” and when I asked why, he said he felt it was reminiscent of a high school event at first, but mentioned that as the night went on he really enjoyed himself. I asked, “Once the performances started?” He said yes, “The performances were really good.” I asked if he had been to an event like this before and he asked if I meant drag shows, so I told him I did. He said he has been to many drag shows and I asked how he liked them in comparison to this drag show. “Well, this one had a lot more people of color. Some of the other drag shows I have been to didn’t have a lot of people of color performing, so I really appreciated that.” I thought back to reading *Men Like That*, how people of color were separated from the white LGBTQ+ community at that time in Mississippi. Considering the demographics then, the LGBTQ+ community in Mississippi seems to be moving in a more inclusive and diverse direction, which the boy I was speaking to emphasized an appreciation for. The drag queen that had donated her tips to Tupelo pride walked by us at this point and I told him “She was my favorite,” and he agreed, saying “I LOVED her.”

As I left the event, I passed back by the table where the entrance fees had been taken. I considered how this might have influenced the space. Going into an LGBTQ+ event in my

hometown, I wondered if there would be anyone showing opposition, as I had seen through the video about Starkville pride. Reflecting on the space as I left, I wondered if having the event in a somewhat hidden place and taking up entrance fees might have minimized protest or opposition.

## **Tupelo Pride at Fairpark, Fieldnotes**

### **October 12, 2019**

**What:** Tupelo Pride

**Where:** Fairpark in downtown, Tupelo, MS.

**When:** Saturday, October 12, 2019

**Time of Arrival:** 10:20 a.m.

**Student Researcher:** Stephanie Poiroux

I arrived at the park for Tupelo Pride at around 10:20 a.m. When I walked into the park, I noticed two tents on my right and a row of different tents on my left. Some people were still in the process of setting up their tents since Tupelo Pride wouldn't start until 11:00 a.m. One of the tents on my right was selling rainbow tie-dyed shirts that read "Tupelo Pride 2019." A little bit away from those tents stood a giant white tent that I later learned was the VIP tent. From there, I saw several smaller tents that sold refreshments such as coffee and different types of food for lunch. There was also a popsicle stand and a food truck with a drawing of a gypsy on its side that sold hamburgers. There was a small stage with two speakers set up in front of city hall that faced a small, inground amphitheater like area. To the left of the amphitheater area was a relatively big tent that was sponsored by Toyota. There were two black cars on display, and they had a timeline set up in their tent. It was titled "A Road Map to Equality." The Toyota tent was part of a small clearing that had numerous other tents lining its perimeter. These tents looked different than the ones I glanced at earlier; the ones in this clearing were vendor tents that sold items made by LGBTQ creators.

Beyond the clearing, there was a small space with benches and an Elvis statue. I watch as someone climbed on the statue and draped a pride flag across his shoulders, which remained there for there for the duration of Tupelo pride. In fact, there was rainbow colored anything

everywhere. There were flags, t-shirts, hats, skirts, crochet pieces, and numerous other things that featured the rainbow color scheme. However, there was also representation for the smaller groups within the pride community. The colors for identities such as trans or bisexual were incorporated into the designs of some of the merchandise, and flags with these colors were also being distributed.

When I first arrived at the park, we mainly stayed around the Invisible Histories Project tent. The reason why I stayed so close to their tent was because I didn't want to wander around and start taking too many notes before the event actually started. Their tent was placed right next to the park entrance and had two tables set up underneath it. One table had information about the Invisible Histories Project and for people to put down their contact information if they wanted to share an oral history. The second table was dedicated to their exhibit as they brought several archival pieces from the IHP collection. Although I did not get the chance to look over the exhibit, one of its project leaders, Josh, held up a magazine to show us. It had a naked male on the cover. I was a little shocked to see him hold up a magazine like that and it really caught me off guard, but I rationalized that it was a part of history and just decided to go along with it. The clothes of the IHP directors were also interesting. Maigen wore a yellow shirt with a bee on it that read "Les-BEE-an" with the bee in the middle of the word. Josh had on a blue shirt with stereotypical conservative adjectives and the shirt basically said to resist patriarchy. At some point, two drag queens came over to tour their tent and began to talk with the IHP people. One was very tall with pink hair, extravagant make up and a silver and black dress. The other was African American and wore a black body suit. After talking for a bit, the two walked away. I then saw a couple walk into the park with their two daughters and I assumed that they were just

passing through. However, a few minutes later, I saw them and their daughters talking to one of the drag queens that had just left our tent.

As it drew closer to 11:00 a.m., I went to the restroom and then decided to start exploring the vendor tents. As I started to look at the pride-centered wares, I noticed that a majority of them had some sort of rainbow design or color scheme to them, which makes sense. However, as I perused the tents, I felt pressured to find some group to join. I didn't necessarily feel uncomfortable, but I did feel out of place just walking around by myself. Then again, it was an entirely new environment for me and one I didn't feel a part of. As a result of this feeling, I joined two classmates as they browsed the tents. We stopped at a tent that sold artwork created by an LGBTQ artist. They sold several different types of art pieces such as drawings, magnets, and stickers. Several of the pieces were inspired by genitalia, which I found strange and sort of jarring. However, I did buy two stickers from them for one of my friends. After we had finished with that tent, we started to head back to the IHP tent. Along the way, I noticed that one of my other classmates had arrived, so I went out to say hi to him.

My classmate and I explored the tents to the right of the IHP tent. These tents had representative from activist groups, such as the Mississippi chapter of the ACLU, counseling services, and an animal rescue group. Every person we spoke to was very open and welcoming and seemed very supportive of the LGBTQ community. We mentioned several times that we were both surprised and happy to see that there were at least two tents that discussed counseling services at Tupelo Pride. We went to one tent, but I wasn't paying attention to what exactly they were talking about or what they represented. However, just before we left, one of the people asked if we wanted to take a flag with us. I asked what the flags meant since I honestly had no idea. They explained what each colored flag represented except for one because they weren't

entirely sure what it was either. I later found out that that flag was the heterosexual flag. In that moment, though, I didn't know that, so I picked up the bisexual flag and carried that one around with me in support of my bisexual friends.

The last table we visited had representatives from Indivisible of Northeast Mississippi. We had actually run into one of the representatives earlier at the ACLU tent, and she asked us to sign up at her table. When we talked to the representative earlier, she said that the purpose for the group was for activism. I signed their email list.

After we had finished with the last table, we heard someone making an announcement, so we began to head to the stage. I couldn't exactly hear what was being said, but I was able to gather that they were about to have a small drag show. We were more towards the back of the crowd, but more and more people began to gather around to watch the show, and I made a rough count of at least 50 people in that small area.

There were four performances in total, and for three of them the announcer commented on the personal connections they had and how they helped them in their walk as a drag queen. The outfits the drag queens wore were elaborate. The two who came to the IHP tent were in the show, and they were accompanied by two other drag queens, one of which was crowned Miss Tupelo last year. The people in the crowd often clapped, shouted encouragements, and tipped the drag queens during their performance. At several different points, the drag queens would stop in the middle of their performances to hug people in the crowd that they knew.

As I watched the crowd, I took note of how people were dressed. Most people were dressed in very casual clothes, such as a t-shirt, jeans, and a jacket since it was kind of chilly. However, there were several people whose clothes I described as bright, loud, colorful, frilly, and over the top in my jottings. For example, in the middle of the drag show, a young person

approached a group of what I assumed were his friends. He wore a very poofy, gray outfit that is hard for me to describe. His friends commented on the outfit and said that it looked good. A little while later, this group was joined by a tall drag queen who wore a zebra-print pink dress that kind of reminded me of Lisa Frank. They also praised the drag queen for their outfit and makeup. Several people at the event had dyed hair.

Another thing I noticed was that very few people stood by themselves. People were usually either in pairs or in small groups. If a person was standing alone, they were soon joined by another person. There were also a lot of families at Tupelo Pride. It was very nice and cute to see small children running around during the drag show or playing around and blowing bubbles. What was interesting about these groups was their composition. A lot of these groups were organized by age. I saw several high school and college students at Tupelo Pride, and they mainly came in groups or pairs of their friends. Families also tended to stick together, and older people were gathered in their own groups. The only exception to this was a young woman who zoomed around on roller skates the whole time. She came just as the event started and left as soon as the parade was over, and while she would talk to people from time to time, she mainly kept to herself and skated all over the park.

Once the drag show was over, my classmate and I decided to look at the vendor tents. One tent we were at for quite some time featured products designed by an individual who sought to help trans people in Mississippi by selling products to fund these organizations. The main design I saw included the words “Human Love” with each letter featuring the different colors of the various parts of the LGBTQ community. I even bought a shirt from this vendor that read “Love Thy Neighbor No Exceptions.” I kind of struggled while deciding which shirt to buy. I wanted to help support this cause, but I also wanted a shirt that wouldn’t get me in trouble with

my campus ministry. As a result, I bought that one. The tent right next to that one sold crochet pieces that were really interesting to look at. They also had pieces that you could hang up on the wall, one of which said something along the lines of fighting back against the patriarchy. That seemed to be a design that was very popular as I saw merchandise featuring that phrase in several tents.

We spent a considerable amount of time at another tent that featured hand-made jewelry. The merchandise was particularly interesting to me because several of the pieces were related to anime or video games. At one point, I was startled when I felt a hand touch my back, and I saw that it was another person looking over my shoulder at the jewelry. She said sorry for startling me, but lingered for a moment before moving away, which I also found kind of odd.

After my classmate got what he was looking for, we decided to peruse the Toyota tent. He expressed to me that he didn't know how to feel about having a large corporation at Tupelo Pride, but I was more surprised to see them there at all. I had no idea that a company like Toyota would have a division dedicated to their LGBTQ employees. We both found the "Road Map to Equality" exhibit to be fairly interesting, though. The timeline began with the Stonewall Riots and listed notable events in LGBTQ history up to the 2010s. Part of the exhibit was for visitors to write on a sticky note something about their life and put it on the timeline. As such, the map was littered with sticky notes detailing when people came out, when their friends and family members came out, or when someone became an ally. Some people also put their own birthdays on the timeline, which I found to be really funny. Most of the sticky notes were centered around the 2010s, while the 70s, 80s, and 90s were fairly sparse.

After looking over the map, we decided to join another person from our class at the edge of the amphitheater like area. Music played through the entirety of Tupelo Pride, with it

constantly switching between an established playlist of party and disco music or live music. I was also taken aback by the music choices, and I think I heard Dolly Parton's "Jolene" and Fleetwood Mac songs played multiple times throughout the day. At one point, the singers, who were also a lesbian couple, began to play "Tennessee Whiskey" and asked people to slow dance. No one did, but they were clearly enjoying the music. People would come back to this area to sit and talk together and listen to the music once they had finished looking at the tents. Honestly, this is not what I was expecting Tupelo Pride to be. I had thought that people would be giving speeches and then we would have this big march down the streets in Tupelo. This felt much more like a music festival with people just coming together and celebrating who they were. It was such an open and relaxed environment and I appreciated how laid back it all felt.

As we stood together and talked about what we had seen, I noticed an interracial lesbian couple talking and there were several other groups spread out across the space. They weren't really paying much attention to the music and were instead focused on their conversations. A family stood by next to us and the little ones ran around blowing bubbles.

Another interesting thing was that there were no protestors. I had fully expected to see people outside of the park bearing picket signs and yelling at us, but there was no one. There was actually no resistance of protest that I saw while I was there, which was very surprising to me. After watching *Small Town Gay Bar*, I figured something like that would happen, but it didn't. Instead, everything was peaceful and calm; a community was able to come together and celebrate who they were without being attacked for it.

At around 1:30 p.m., an announcement was made for people to start heading to the main entrance of the park for the parade. I joined others from my class at the front the group, and we all started to walk down the sidewalk. We passed by a Mugshots and a gas station before

reaching the lake. Along the way, people would stop and stare at us, which was kind of weird, but no one tried to protest or stop us. In fact, on the way to the lake and back, cars passing by would honk at us in support and some people even stuck their heads out their windows to yell words of encouragement. Each time that happened, and even at random, people in the march would raise up the pride flag and wave it around. Eventually, I was separated from my group by another group and then started walking by myself. People were walking at different speeds, so the parade became very spread out. Because of this, it was easy to see people separate themselves into little groups. Again, I noticed the same thing as before: young people stayed with other young people, families stuck together, and older people formed their own groups. I once again felt pressure to join a group because I was walking by myself and I felt out of place, but this time I ignored the feeling and chose to continue walking on my own. On the way back to the park, we continued to receive support from people and cars. At one point, two servers stepped out of a restaurant and yelled, "Happy Pride!" and something along the lines of how they loved us and that we were awesome. Even as we were returning to the park, people stood along the edge of the park, smiling at us and giving us high fives for a march well done. Most of the people left at the conclusion of the parade.

## **Tupelo Pride at Fairpark, Fieldnotes**

### **October 12, 2019**

**What:** Tupelo Pride

**Where:** Fairpark in downtown, Tupelo, MS.

**When:** Saturday, October 12, 2019

**Time of arrival and departure:** 10:40 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.

**Student Researcher:** Maddie Shappley

### **Arrival and Fairpark**

The drive to Tupelo on Saturday was more calming than the night before. Due to the late-night, my friends and I stopped at Cups to get coffee before the drive. We decided to listen to a playlist that encapsulated a fall mood. The road to Tupelo was vacant and I wondered if people would be coming out to the pride event.

Fairway park looked to me as if you took the grove and put it in the middle of the square. It was sectioned off and looked like a park, due to the brick column entrance. Upon entering, there is a grassy lawn on the left and right side of the concrete walkway. Straight ahead is a concrete circle with park benches for attendees to sit. Beyond this point was what seemed to be makeshift stands like what would be in an auditorium. However, these stands were only blocks of cement dispersed into several rows in the grass in a semi-circle. This makeshift stand stands in front of Tupelo's City Hall and today as a small platform stage for musicians, drag performers and pride organizers.

Several tents were set up. There was an information tent right off the bat that was also selling Tupelo pride shirts. I also noticed a big white tent that looked as though a fancy outdoor tent you would have at a wedding. Around it was a white picket fence. Later Eric would say on

stage that it was a VIP tent that had liquor in it. You could buy a ticket for 50 dollars to be a VIP. To the left side I saw that Josh and Maigen had already set up an Invisible Histories tent. I noticed to the left of us a few other tents were being put up. I also noticed across from us was a huge tent with a new Toyota car and an old Toyota. It looked as though Toyota, who was a big sponsor of Tupelo pride this year, had their own, separate exhibition space.

### **Invisible Histories Tent**

There were two tables in the IHP tent. One had some artifacts from archives to display, such as a book from the Gay Activist Alliance, and flyers for LGBTQ spaces. We helped clip these to the tablecloth so they would not blow away in the wind. Above this table were some printed poster boards with information about the Invisible Histories Project, LGBTQ history, as well as things that can be archived. The second table, which sat facing the entrance walkway, had our candy bowl, Invisible Histories pamphlet, a signup sheet, business cards for Hooper, Maigen and Josh, as well as an electronic chip reader for donations, and some pins. The pins have an opossum that has a rainbow bow in its fur with the text “Unapologetically Southern. Unapologetically Queer.”.

While waiting for pride to start, Maigen played music on a speaker. Her song choice was the Indigo Girls. Josh was excited when the song came on because he was “singing it this morning.” He had a rainbow fan that flared out; he would clap it to fan himself and sing. Megan made a joke saying “We were at the lesbian church. Come get converted.” Everyone in the group laughed. I commented that if the University of Mississippi’s Grove was like this, I would attend tailgates more. After this Josh noted that many of the LGBTQ playlists made today or on Spotify only have songs from the last five years. He and Maigen begin to talk about dancing at the Stonewall Inn and hearing specific older songs and reminiscing on events from their lives. For Josh and Maigen, music signifies a queer feeling, event or meaning.

Josh then showed Hooper some more of the artifacts and began to share that he had gotten some archival items last night. Josh had been in contact with someone at the drag show who had mentioned that they had a newspaper from one of the first marriage proposals in Tupelo. We started talking about research ethics and after this conversation lulled, Maigen mentioned that there were no police at the event. Hooper then happily shouted, “No cops at Pride!” to which Maigen joined in as well. However, soon after this Maigen noted that if something were to happen, “We would be the ones to get shot then fundraise from it.” There was laughter and then I started thinking about the balloons popping at the drag show the night before. The lack of security there, the lack of security today, and the comments about a mass shooting and money.

Fairly early on, the VIP tent was pointed out. Maigen asked what it was, and I told her that it was the VIP tent, where you can pay to enter and get liquor. Maigen joked, “Lick her? You brought her” to which everyone in the tent laughed. Several of us started to talk about the class divisions that the tent helps perpetuate. I mentioned that there were also VIP tables at the drag show last night. At this point, I heard Josh ask if there would be protestors at the event today. Hooper told him that there were none any at the last Pride. This sparked a story from Josh. He shared that back when drag queens began reading to children at the Mobile library, his friend had called him. Josh asked for his friend to pan to all the supporters, and then the protestors. Josh asked his friend to obtain one of the signs that anti-gay protestors were carrying. The friend did, and Josh added to the IHP Alabama archive. At this he says “You gotta save the hate too.” Hooper asked if Josh and Maigen were keeping and archiving their hate mail. Josh said, “Oh yeah, everything that comes in.”

Later, I heard the audio begin on stage. Eric came on and noted that the drag show would begin shortly. At this, Josh noted that “It seemed too early for a drag show.” Megan also questioned the timing. The music that was being played from the speakers by the stage competed with the music we were playing. Around this time, an older lesbian couple wandered into the tent. Josh struck up conversation with them. They mentioned that they had been together for 50 years. One of the women said, “I tried to be straight,” which made the whole tent laugh. After the couple left, we saw a middle-aged couple that was wearing “free dad hugs” T shirts.

Josh also mentioned the cameraman who was filming the drag show on Friday night for the news and how he was filming too much. He said, “It was not the space to do that.” I wondered why. Was it because it was an LGBTQ exclusive space last night? Was it because the man was filming for the news and chose to include many shots of the drag show? Did this man’s filming take away the purpose of the space and interrupt the tone of the night? Was the cameraman straight?

At one point, a discussion was brought up about sex talks in school and the difference in generations due to HIV. I found this extremely interesting because Josh was sharing that conversation about sex was very silent until the AIDS epidemic. Many LGBTQ groups also had heightened awareness of safe sex due to the HIV crisis.

Miss Tupelo pride stopped by the tent and looked at the artifacts that Josh had on the table. Through reading the poster of the types of materials used for archives Miss Tupelo Pride mentioned that they would be moving soon and had “A lot of gay stuff.” One of the things they mentioned was a thesis they wrote at The University of Memphis in 2004. They shared that they were getting a degree in graphic design and did their thesis on gay visibility in network television. This meant that they would watch every show that had gay representation on network

television to look at how gay people were being represented. While talking, I got the impression that this research was only meant for gay men. Miss Tupelo pride did not mention lesbians, bisexuals or transgender people.

At some point during the day, I heard someone say, “That plastic bag is living its best life.” Everyone in the tent looked around Fairpark to see what they were talking about. Some people laughed, I did not see what was being talked about, until Dr. McDowell also shared that she did not know what we were staring at till she looked up. As I looked up, I noticed a plastic bag flying in the wind above the park. Dr. McDowell mentioned that it was “so Mississippi. It makes so much sense” that a plastic bag would be flying in the sky over a Mississippi pride.

Maigen had mentioned that some lady was supposed to stop by the tent to sign her name. When Josh asked who, Maigen just said, “I don’t know — some white lady.” Josh and Maigen joked about how this pride was not racially diverse and there were a lot of white ladies everywhere. To prove this point Josh yelled for a “White lady call” by shouting loudly “Pumpkin Spice Latte.” Everyone in the tent laughed.

### **People at Booths**

One booth had handmade jewelry. There were beaded bracelets along with bows and dangling earrings. The girl working behind the table rainbow everything on. Kayla and I browsed her selection of bracelets and earrings. My girlfriend and I both found bracelets that we liked. She found a bracelet that said “Bisexual” and I found a bracelet that said “LGTBQ,” with a color combo of pink, white and blue beads. I have always seen the acronym as “LGBTQ” but I wondered if this re-doing mixed with the pink, white and blue beads signaled a more inclusion of the Transgender community. The bracelets seemed to focus more on gayness than specific identities. There were “lesbihonest” and “bisexual” bracelets, but I saw many more that read

“Gay AF” and “Bear.” I also saw a bracelet with crosses that said “Jesus” on it. This struck me as out of place. My girlfriend and I also bought two pairs of earrings. One pair was of the shape of Mississippi but colored with the rainbow pride flag. The second pair had the lips from Rocky Horror with Dr. Frank-N-Furter dangling underneath them.

We also went to a tent that had a lot of watercolor art prints. There were several drawings of vaginas and sayings like “Hi my name is Gay AF,” “Gay Dar,” and “Titties.” We got a sticker that with the word “Titties” - the letters to this word were created by different kinds of boobs. We also got a small print in a frame of a vagina that had girl power written in it. Upon paying, my girlfriend realized she left her wallet in the car. I stayed by the booth and gave her my keys. The woman behind the booth had said that the artwork was her girlfriend’s. I asked if they lived here in Tupelo. The woman said that they had just moved to Birmingham a couple of years ago and just recently bought a house in a suburb there. I congratulated her and said that’s a big deal. She responded that it was. Her and her partner are the only gay couple in the neighborhood, and it was “a big deal.” While talking, she seemed very proud of the house. I told her about IHP and how it originated in Birmingham. When my girlfriend returned, we paid for our things, took a business card, and said goodbye.

### **People I interviewed**

At one booth, I looked and realized that it was Mo and Lena. I had not seen Lena since I interviewed her. I stopped by and gave her a hug and asked how she was doing. She said good and that she was excited to see me. I told her that I missed her at the drag show. I then told her about the ethnopoems and asked if she would like her and Star’s poem. She looked delighted and said, “Well hell yeah I would.” I told her I could bring her and Star’s poem the next time I did an interview in Tupelo. Both her and Mo shared their experiences and stated that they both talked

about things they hadn't talked about in a while. Lena shared that I made her cry and that I was a mix between Barbra Walters and Oprah. It made me happy that both Mo and Lena enjoyed being a part of the Invisible Histories Project. Afterward, I told Lena I would let her get back to making money. I noticed she was selling some Pride T-shirts as well as some Pride water bottles.

Later in the day, I ran into Laura Leigh and Jenn Fowlkes. We said hello and I hugged each of them. I told them that I missed them at the drag show. I told them about the exhibit we had of Charles's records. They seemed interested. Jenn told me that after her interview with me she went back to compare notes with Laura Leigh. I told them that their stories about how they met was similar. They laughed. I walked them over to the IHP tent and introduced them to Josh and Maigen. Once I said Josh's name and brought them to the tent, Jenn told me that they had already met. Laura Leigh and Jenn helped Josh and Maigen set up their tent this morning. I thought this was cool and again saw this sense of community.

### **Musical Guests**

I noticed a lot of interesting comments made by musical guests. The first group to perform was a duo called "Not my Sister." When announcing their name, the singer said, "We called ourselves that because we get asked if we are sisters even though its different races." At this, the singer was noting that the couple had different races. This comment also notes for somehow sexuality can't transcend race. Throughout their performance comments were made with inclusions of the south but in a way that gave little faith to its progressiveness. The lead mentioned the phrase "hillbilly's do what they do" as well as "we're from Chattanooga, it's still backward there".

### **Pride March**

While marching out of Fairpark and around the lake, I felt odd. I have been involved in Oxford Pride and felt as though Tupelo Pride was very different. Whenever I walk in Oxford Pride, I feel

safe and like the community is there to support me. The square and parts of University and Jackson Avenues are blocked off and there are families and friends who sit on the sidewalks and wave to us as we march by. Plus, the crowd is larger at Oxford Pride which may be why I feel safer. While walking in Tupelo Pride, I felt very vulnerable. I felt exposed by walking on the sidewalk of a busy street. There was only one cop car sheltering us from the street but once you walked past that car, there was nothing in-between you or the street. Additionally, as we were walking, cars were driving past. It was hard to tell if those driving by slowly were watching in support or watching in general. There were also honks and yells from people driving by, which sometimes startled me. This again made me think about the lack of security at pride. The walk was short, and it definitely felt as though we were walking to show that we were here as a community. When we returned to the entrance of Fairpark I noticed a girl off to the side with a bi-pride flag wrapped around her, sobbing to a police officer. I was not sure what happened.

When the march was over, Dr. Wilkerson and I ran into David from the night before again. David stopped us on the way to the stage to tell us that “There needs to be another gay bar here.” He mentioned that he didn’t care when or how it happened or by who but that it needed to happen. He seemed very desperate and longing when talking about a gay bar. He mentioned how every week he would be at Rumors and that every night they would play the song “I love this bar” because they all loved it so much. On the way out of the park, I saw David in his car waving a Pride flag out the window as he drove down the streets of tupelo.

# Tupelo Pride Observation Guide

Dr. Amy McDowell, SOC 651

Event: \_\_\_\_\_

Time of arrival and departure: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Venue

Describe where this gathering is located.

Describe the flyers, exhibits, booths, and decorations.

- Are there bulletin boards and banners in this space? What do these say?
- What about flags? Where are they located (on people, buildings, booths)? How many are there?

Was a donation or door charge taken? Where? If yes, how was the purpose of this framed (if at all)?

## Participants

Can you tell who is in charge? How?

- How are organizers of Tupelo Pride interacting with participants?

Approximately how many people are here for the event? How did this fluctuate throughout the day/night?

Offer a demographic profile of the group (age, race, etc.)

- Do you think this is a diverse space? Why/why not?
- Describe how people are dressed. Are some outfits more exciting than others?

Are children and teenagers present? How many? What are the age ranges? How are they involved?

## Social Interactions

Describe the social interactions.

- How are most people greeting one another in this space (hugging, handshakes, high fives)?
- Are people laughing a lot, appear to be having serious conversations, etc.?

Are there any cliques? Describe the cliques.

- Does anyone seem out of place, lonely, or aloof? Explain.

Did anyone recognize that you might be an outsider? How? What was their response?

Describe your interactions with others. What did you talk about?

## Performers, Audience, and Pride

Describe how LGBTQ+ pride is conveyed in this space, e.g., signs, symbols, etc.

- What about flags? Where are flags located (on people, buildings, booths)? How many are there?
- What language is used to convey pride?
- Which groups get the most/least attention in this space? How do you know?

What was the climax of this event?

- What seemed to get people the most/least excited?

Describe each of the performers (personality, appeal, dress...)

- How are performers interacting with participants?
- Did anything go wrong during the performance? What? How was the error/mistake salvaged?

How did the audience respond to the performer (engaged, disinterested, emotional)?

- Describe any spontaneous physical or verbal responses.
- Describe any ritual responses.

Offer a description of the type of music used when and how.

- What was the purpose of the music? When was it used?
- How did people respond to the music? Did different people respond in different ways?