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BLESS OUR HEARTS:
TOWARDS A MODEL FOR QUEER ORAL HISTORY

by

Colin Whitworth

B.A., The University of Alabama, 2012

M.A., The University of Alabama, 2014

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree

Department of Communication Studies
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 2020

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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

BLESS OUR HEARTS:
TOWARDS A MODEL FOR QUEER ORAL HISTORY

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Colin Whitworth

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the field of Communication Studies

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Colin Whitworth, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Communication Studies, presented on January 17, 2020, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: BLESS OUR HEARTS: TOWARDS A MODEL FOR QUEER ORAL HISTORY

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook

This dissertation offers an outlined proposal and a model for practicing queer oral history—a nuancing of oral history praxis. Queer oral history is rooted in performance studies’ call to consider everyday texts alongside Dwight Conquergood’s (1985) articulations of ethical and dialogic performance of the other. I propose that queer oral history exists as an alternative praxis to traditional oral history; in order for this distinction to emerge, a practitioner must accept two charges. The first is a commitment to destabilizing oral history through the inclusion of other diverse methodological practices. Further, the researcher must welcome the ethical imperative to reflexively question subjectivity through their own role in constructing an oral history. Queer oral history demands of its practitioners a different set of goals that grow from traditional oral history, but also carefully complicate the practice of oral history as a methodology in order to address the in-between role of the subject-researcher. This placement within the gaps—the in-between—renders queer oral history theoretically queer, opening up possibilities beyond simply an oral history about queer themes. Because of its focus on commitments as a way to lead practice, queer oral history could prove useful for other person-based qualitative research methods.

In order to propose queer oral history, this document traces one specific performance—*Bless Our Hearts: An Oral History of the Queer South*—from intellectual inception through scripting, staging, performance, and reperformance. Offering theoretical precepts, a completed script, and deep discussions of choices in scripting and embodiment, this dissertation offers a

model that shows one queer oral history—about the intersections of queer and Southern identities—as it moves from interview process to complete performance project.

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The first acknowledgment that I must offer is to Craig Gingrich-Philbrook. I came to SIU never having had an openly queer mentor, or even teacher. His consistent assurance and confidence in my queer scholarship and in me has been (and will continue to be) life-giving and nurturing in a way that I never quite knew that I needed. I have so much love for him, his words, his spirit, and his collection of tiny chickens.

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I would also like to thank many of my friends and colleagues, who at different times have been distractions, helpers, shoulders to cry or sigh upon, support beams, and all other manner of necessary roles for me and this Ph.D. journey: Alex Davenport, Mick Brewer, Anna Wilcoxon, Shelby Swafford, Andrea Baldwin, Nicole Costantini, Lindsay Greer, Lindy Wagner (and many others). The community in Carbondale is something special that I miss nearly every day.

Finally, I want to thank the Department of Communication Studies at Southern Illinois University for being the perfect academic home for five years. I did not know what I was stepping into in 2014, but I am truly a better person and scholar now that I am nearly on the other side.

Thank you to everyone who has ever encouraged me, helped me, or simply been there.

DEDICATION

I write a lot later in this document about the ways that queer folk are seemingly always located within a larger cultural war; ever since I was able to articulate my own queerness as a teenager, there have been moments where people questioned the legitimacy of my existence, fought about my rights, and felt compelled to enact violence on people like me—my people. However, as heavy as this sounds, it is frustratingly and depressingly mundane for us, just another reality of being a queer person in this place at this time. In the spirit of this, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to every queer community I have ever been a part of—whether two people or two million.

I specifically want to point to a few of these moments of community though. I dedicate this to every queer academic who came before me and had to similarly wonder if the words queer or LGBT on their CV would damage their respect or their chances for a position within their field. I want to thank all of them for making the road easier for me, for passing the proverbial torch, and for trusting me to continue making it better for future generations of queer scholars.

I want to acknowledge the queer communities of friends that I have occupied through the years—from Tiffy's infamous trailer to the dance floors at bars to the hallways of the different schools I have attended.

I dedicate this to queer communities of the South—and specifically to Grace, Jamie, Joan, Akila, Calvin, Austin, Shekinah, Leigh, and Nick.

Finally, I want to dedicate this to Allison, my queer best friend, in part for letting me steal the baby doll blankets in pre-school. Our shared history could be its own dissertation. I love you.

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CHAPTER 1

FROM THERE TO QUEER: TOWARDS A QUEER ORAL HISTORY

She offers me a bottle of water and despite my best protestations puts her cat, Mars, in the room off to the side. “He’ll be fine,” she assures me, “... besides, he’s liable to get into trouble.” She brings me a water bottle, and I set it on the ground next to the straight-back floral sitting chair that I have nested in. Between us sits a microphone and beside us a camera. I am recording her responses to questions about what it means to be a queer Southerner. I feel weirdly at home in her second-floor apartment, and she seems strangely comfortable with the presence of a man she has only communicated with via e-mail. I look at her face, a sprightly energy crinkling at the end of each line in spite of her seventy-six years. For the next hour and a half she tells me stories. These are stories about love, and family, and religion; stories about holding hands with another woman well before Stonewall; stories about shame and reconciliation.

Throughout, she looks to me, nonverbally affirming with kind eyes that remind me of my grandmother and seem to say, “You know. You understand. You are the same.” After I have packed my nest up, she leads me down the narrow hallway to the apartment door. I comment on how wonderful and lovely her stories were. “Everyone seems to think they are a bad interview, but trust me—everyone has been fantastic. Especially you though; I could listen to you talk all day.”

“Well, it helps knowing you’re one of us . . . you know, both a Southerner and an LGBT individual,” the rhythm of each letter punctuated on her tongue.

“I think so . . . or at least hope so,” I comment. We hug, and I head out the door. On the way to my car, I feel my head tilt skyward and sway in awe at her life story and that she shared it

with me. I am more amazed, still, at the connection we were able to forge in so little time.

Kristin Langellier (2014) writes, “Telling personal stories and listening to life histories is an intimate interaction, with the gaze and ear trained on the vulnerable body as a site of experience and testimony” (p. 6). As I sat in this participant’s living room, I felt the power and historical weight of that testimony; I felt the intimacy of the interaction. The notion of vulnerability is perhaps trickier. Some of the narratives she shared were vulnerable, definitely. However, in much the same way she seemed to knowingly nod to what she might have assumed were parallel experiences based on my own identifications as Southern and queer, I felt a modicum of my own vulnerability as well. As I sat in that floral print straight-back chair, I was empathically open to her emotions while attending to my own. While she narrated stories about being disowned by members of her family, I felt familiar fears about the possibility of the same thing happening to me. When she spoke of the woman she eventually reunited with across years and state borders, I thought of holding the hand of my long-distance partner. Her vulnerability ignited my own, and through her personal storytelling, we found common ground across the differences that we inhabit.

I come to this project—the same project for which I interviewed Joan, the seventy-six-year-old (self-described) gay woman written about above—with a few different interests. I am interested in my own place in the queer and Southern tapestry I am uncovering and highlighting; I am intrigued by the tensions both my participants and I seem to find between our identity and our home space; but I am also interested as a scholar. How can I find the importance of these things for not only myself but a larger audience? How can I use the qualitative and performative methods I have learned to illuminate the dialogic feelings I experience with interviewees like

Joan for other people? How can I combine or push existing methods even further as a way to achieve that goal?

This dissertation project is an attempt to answer these questions for myself and to advance the scholarly dialogue surrounding performative methods of oral history. As I have worked through this project, I have arrived at the notion of a queer oral history—an oral history that embraces liminality in terms of subjectivity and methodology in order to more fully represent and embody the dialogic engagement of similarity and difference. This chapter is organized as both an introduction to and an overview of this dissertation and my articulations of queer oral history. First, I look to regional identity, situating my lived experiences and myself as a queer Southerner to argue that regional identity is an important aspect of intersectionality. Then I ask what it means to look at methods from the perspectives of methodological intersections and blending, discussing how this viewpoint leads to my own experimentation with queer oral history. Following that, I trace the theoretical precepts that have put queer theory and queerness in conversation with oral history. Finally, I propose the extension of oral history method into *queer* oral history, offering ways of actualizing the theoretical ideals I suggest before outlining the chapters contained within this document.

The Southland: Regional Identity and Intersections

At the outset of this work, perhaps one of the most important positions I held was one that Joan observed during our interview. “You are one of us,” she said, and I am. I was born and raised in a small town in Northern Alabama, and I identify with many aspects that are associated with the South and with Southern culture. Throughout high school, though, I found myself struggling with my cultural geographic identity; at the same time, I found myself confused and tossed around by the fluidity of realizing a subaltern sexual identity (Whitworth, 2014). The two

seemed incompatible. I felt as if I could not be a “good” Southerner and also a “good” LGBTQ+ individual. The signals and messages I received about the two seemed to be contradictory, and for a long time I struggled to reconcile these two important aspects of my intersectional identity.

Intersectionality (Combahee, 1982; Crenshaw, 1994) is one of the most prevalent ways that scholars theorize identity; while the theory starts within Black feminist thought as a way to articulate the oppression that Black women face as different and sometimes more pronounced than those who do not inhabit this particular intersection of marginalization, it can be used as a useful tool to make sense of many disparate identities. In the primary example of Black womanhood, both Blackness and womanness are innately tied to each other, inseparable and intersecting. This is true of the multiplicity of identities that we inhabit—the way we understand and experience one aspect of ourselves is inherently tied to the other aspects that co-exist within us. A woman of color and a white woman are likely to understand their identifications with womanhood in different ways.

More recently Crenshaw (2015) revisited the term, making the case for its continued utility, articulating that intersectionality is “an analytic sensibility, a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power” (para. 6). Supporting the use of intersectionality across disparate identity markers, Crenshaw continues, “The better we understand how identities and power work together from one context to another, the less likely our movements for change are to fracture” (para. 8).

As I take stock of my own intersectionality as a white, queer, Southern man, I recognize the ways that intersections often contradict, offering us both privileged and oppressed standpoints. However, I contend that regional identity is an often overlooked yet complicating aspect of intersectional positionality. Like many of the things we tend to think of when we think

of various identity markers, regional identity carries with it loaded associations and valuations based on where one may be from. “Southern” identities, like mine, are those marked by their origin from or affiliation with the “cultural South” of the United States. This cultural South tends to mirror what may also be called the “Deep South”—think of Mississippi, Georgia, or Alabama (Conkin, 1988; Denkler, 2007)—an area deeply rooted in its perceived cultural identity and the public memories (Brundage, 2009) that point to a legacy seen as socially conservative and frankly racist. In a vein compatible with this conservatism, the South is in many ways mired in the effects of a religious stranglehold, famously referred to by Flannery O’Connor as its “Christ-haunting” (Ketchin, 1994; Wood, 2005).

I grew up in Alabama—a state many think of as the “buckle” of the proverbial Bible Belt, a swath of states that cut across the Southern U.S. noted for the prevalence of conservative Christianity. Coming of age in this area was loaded with its own kind of messy, confusing, and sometimes hostile environments for realizing and enacting my own queer identities. Experiences that I had while in those environments (during very formative times in my life) created the foundation for my current conceptions of and interests in the complicated ways that identity may be considered or understood. The sometimes-clashing nature of my environment and my identity were both knowledge-producing and influential for me.

So, from the standpoint of my identity, I come to this project with my own set of questions. I succinctly state some of my reasons for interviewing Joan and other queer Southerners in *Bless Our Hearts: An Oral History of the Queer South*, the solo show associated with this project:

My own narrative always seemed out of place, growing up. I spent 26 years in the South. As a queer Southerner, I always felt that I couldn’t

be enough of both, that I'd have to choose. Sometimes, we find the greatest clarity through listening, so that's why [I traveled the South to interview a diverse subset of queer Southerners] . . . Now, through their stories, I hope to better understand my own. I hope to see the ways that being a queer Southerner can somehow simultaneously feel like belonging nowhere and having family everywhere you go. I want to know if people have felt the same tensions that I have, across gender, race, identification, and age. (pp. 83-84)

Standing at the Methodological Intersections

As much as I arrive at this project as a queer Southerner, I also come to it as a researcher and practitioner of performance. As a performer, oral history seems to be a fruitful and intriguing match with its share of similarities to the performative approaches to which I am accustomed. Performance asks us to consider voice, text, and body (Pelias & Shaffer, 2007; Cixous, 2016), so it makes sense that many oral historians have created texts that closely mirror conventionally prepared performance scripts. As with other traditions such as the educationally-focused Chautauqua performance (Gentile, 1989), oral history practitioners, including Studs Terkel via his radio work (WFMT, 2018), often offered their voice and/or body to the service of their oral history text through performance. Beyond explicit discussion of oral history and performance (Stucky, 1995), Della Pollock (2005) points out, "Oral historians and performance scholars/practitioners are increasingly discovering shared and complementary investments . . ." (p. 1). Unsurprisingly then, the relationship between performance studies and oral history has been of interest to scholars predating the field's name change from oral interpretation to performance studies. Oberle (1983) writes of wanting to nurture communication between oral

interpretation scholars and those who work with storytelling-based methodologies like oral history (p. 64). Even performance studies' roots within oral interpretation had their own interests in staging and adapting non-fiction texts, with such adaptations called "Readers' Theatre Documentary" (Kleinau & McHughes, 1980, p. 295). Miller (1983) further points to the intersection of interpretation and oral history as a fruitful place to explore the relationship of the field and the method.

Perhaps the most resonant intersections of today's field of performance studies and the practice of oral history can be found in their respective engagements of the body. The ways in which oral history reintegrates the body as an important site of knowing in the data collection process align with Langellier's (1999) articulation of the performative turn. As Langellier articulates this turn, it is "the twin condition of bodiless voices, for example, in ethnographic writing; and voiceless bodies who want to resist the colonizing powers of discourse" (p. 126). Oral history addresses the duality that Langellier introduces—it offers space for both the voice and the body, allowing them to exist together. Through cataloguing and reperformance of participants' bodies, performative oral histories allow bodies to be (re)paired with words, and the words to be reunited with the (re)performances of bodies. When practiced with care, this reunion offers the potential for the oral historian to access embodied epistemologies of the subject simultaneously with the subject's language. Placing queer oral history alongside other performative methodologies and research finds further support in Pelias & Van Oosting's (1987) work tracing the shift from oral interpretation into performance studies. As this shift happens, Pelias & Van Oosting acknowledge that the move is "more than a renaming" (p. 219). They track the ways that shifting what we consider as part of the field has a democratizing effect on scholarly understandings of epistemology similar to the democratic focus central to oral history

practice.

Take for example E. Patrick Johnson's (2008) work in *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*. Johnson expresses the ways that oral history practice is an "invaluable source for documenting and theorizing the cultural norms, practices, beliefs, and attitudes of a particular historical period" (p. 3). He accesses historically unseen knowledges through the identities of his interviewees—Black, gay, Southern men; however, he also accesses often unknown epistemologies through his engagement as he adapts his both words *and* bodies for a same-titled performance of the collected oral history (2010).

Oral history acknowledges and encourages these same sometimes-undervalued expressions of epistemology—specifically the procurement of knowledge from embodied and lived experiences. By presenting coded lived experiences of its participants, oral history offers space and value to the ways that these experiences and the re-telling of them can function as knowledge-producing events; when taken further through the careful performance of oral history texts, the practice of reperformance may allow the performer access to the ways experiences, bodies, and language can work together to produce knowledge.

Pelias & Van Oosting (1987) also argue for an expansion of how we view the performer—for example, a performer may be viewed as a "social actor." The paradigm proposed by Pelias & Van Oosting foregrounds the ethical considerations that must be made by this social performer; this lens of performance strives for understanding between multiple actors, or methodologically, between researcher and subject. Conquergood (1985) has a similar charge for performance studies practitioners in his call for "dialogic performance." A dialogic performance reaches for understanding between two social actors of disparate identities; Conquergood articulates this through an examination of ethnographic performance of the other, but also offers

examples of dialogic performance in oral interpretation. How do we as practitioners perform the other ethically? How do we avoid assumptions and stereotypes? How do we avoid infatuation, objectification, and exotification?

Conquergood (1985) offers a map of what performance of the other may look like—composed of four pitfalls around a center “target,” the map offers what practices to avoid while encouraging the performer to aim for “dialogic performance.” The moral performer should avoid these pitfalls, which Conquergood names as “The Skeptic’s Cop-Out” (an orientation of non-engagement), “The Custodian’s Rip-Off” (a plagiaristic approach), “The Enthusiast’s Infatuation” (a superficial engagement), and “The Curator’s Exhibitionism” (a sensationalization of the subject’s otherness). Conquergood proposes that a focus on the dialogic is the way to navigate around those pitfalls for the practitioner. We must focus on the idea of a holistic person that goes beyond the notion of a tokenizing difference; we should be able to see similarity and difference with an intent simultaneity, creating a dialogue between identities that can lead to deeper understanding and, thus, a more ethical performance of the other.

This ethical care finds itself at the forefront of work by many performance studies practitioners who turn to ethnographic and oral history methodologies as ways to give voice to critique. As D. Soyini Madison (2006) points out, “To recreate for the stage the living performances of everyday remembrances, imaginings, and deeply felt encounters of ethnographic fieldwork is a radical act of translation” (p. 397). While this act of translation heeds so many of the scholarly calls performance studies seems to face following its paradigm shift from oral interpretation, it must necessarily remain saturated in ethical care and consideration for the participant(s) and the audience(s). Madison continues, “The substance of such a translation is only surpassed in its significance by the overwhelming necessity of purpose and ethical

obligation” (p. 397). This ethic of care, which I find exemplifies Conquergood’s notion of dialogic performance, is what we should strive towards; however, we shouldn’t merely use it as a guiding principle, but seek ways to further embrace the dialogic through reflexive consideration of the role of both self and method. Through queering the methodology of oral history (which I expound further below), performers and practitioners may reach more fully towards dialogue by utilizing multiple tools in our performative toolboxes.

The feeling of dialogue pervades my memories of the interview with Joan, described at the beginning of this chapter. Despite a fifty-year difference in age, a difference in gender, and a difference in socioeconomic class, among others, I found her looking at me with eyes that said, “I know you can relate.” I did relate to much of her story, but there were also things that did not strike me as familiar. In spite of or because of this dialectic of connection/disconnection, I felt that I had learned and grown from my experience with her. She offered me a better understanding of a different time and a different set of experiences. As a queer-identified person today, my experiences are contextualized by hers; despite our differences, our histories are in dialogue.

Queer History in Oral History

As I seek to answer my own questions about how best to represent the dialogic experience of my interviews, I find myself wanting more. Wanting something in-between the real-time storytelling event of the interview and my own interpretation of it. A grey area acknowledging that dialectic of dis/connection. A methodology that allows a framework for acknowledging my own experiences and their contextualizations through my interactions with those I have interviewed. I want to *queer* oral history. To queer oral history, then, may mean to utilize queer perspectives in order to “appropriate mainstream methods in ways that contribute to

possibilities for new understandings” (Fish & Russell, 2018, p. 14). Perhaps we approach queering as Muñoz’s (2009) articulation of a “queer gesture”—presuming queerness, queer identity, and muddled gray areas as a form of resistance to dominant reading practices (p. 70). Rooted in queer theory, the act of queering (itself a shortened version of “to offer a queer reading”) is often cited as being based in queer and activist groups and at its core asks the reader or researcher to trouble a given topic or to consider it in non-normative ways. Among all of the definitions that exist of queering, I look to embody Sedgwick’s (1994) understanding that to queer is to find the “open mesh of possibilities” (p. 7). By leaning into the discussions of subjectivity already happening within oral history and ethnographic methodologies, I use this dissertation as a way of opening the mesh and finding new, queer potentialities within the praxis of oral history.

The phrase “queer oral history” itself can be understood in terms of subjectivity; that is, that the topic or theme of the oral history is in some way related to the LGBTQ+ community. In more theoretical terms, however, oral histories seem to be queering themselves more and more as time has progressed. Johnson (2008) points to the methodology’s ability to destabilize truth through performance. He argues that “framing these narratives and the ethnographic process as performance destabilizes notions of *the* truth . . .” (p. 10). Destabilization here happens moment to moment, negotiated between researcher, subject, and memory. Johnson further contends that the focus then is placed “on ‘truth’ as experienced in the storytelling event” (p. 10). As Phelan (2006) explains, “repetition marks it as different” (p. 146), and both the storytelling event and the eventual (re)performance of the narratives are marked by their performative and repetitive qualities. In turn, this marked repetition queers “authoritative notions of history by emphasizing the performative role history plays in shaping our social identities and consciousness”

(Carpenter, 2003, p. 187). This queer process leads us, as Johnson explicates, to a dialogic interaction wherein the interviewee's experience is validated and corroborated by the presence of the interviewer.

As I think of my own interview practices, I narratize moments to myself in my head. I undergo what Jay Allison (1994) refers to as “an ongoing mediation of (my) own physical and/or verbal actions in a temporally bound field” (p. 109). As I traverse this negotiation with myself, I wonder *where* in that temporal field did what Johnson calls validation and corroboration happen, and I wonder if it did happen. Was my presence as a researcher conducting an interview enough to offer this validation to my participants? Does this validation and corroboration happen when a person's life is put upon a page or stage? Then, I think of the knowing looks between my participants and me. I think of my gentle head nods, the “ok's,” the “mm-hmm's,” and the sympathetic glances. I think of the air quotes that I would not have been able to see over the telephone. I think of my own involuntary embodied responses to narratives shared with me—laughter, tensing shoulders, and creased brows. I think of two bodies in a dialogue that ran alongside to the storytelling event, enhancing and emphasizing the meaning of her lived experiences.

In turn, I think of Nan A. Boyd's (2008) position of queering as asking ourselves, “Who is the subject?” Boyd traces the way that oral history and similar ethnographic projects have often been used to make further sense of or situate the researcher's identity through interviewing participants with whom they may identify. She traces the roots of other LGBTQ+ focused narrative works, (notably, D'Emilio's [1983] *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* and Bérubé's [1990] *Coming Out Under Fire*). She cites these works as foundational to queer oral history's commitment to archiving and serving communities—an imperative more likely to be felt by an

in-member of the communities in question. Questioning the subjectivity of a queer oral history, then, can be traced to *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (Kennedy & Davis, 1993). Specifically, Kennedy and Davis (1993) seem to acknowledge the constructed and discursive role memory plays in oral history; does it matter if interviews are fallible or exaggerative? Is there value in the performative remembrances? These acts of narratization can offer embodied responses beyond the duality of past/present, existing in between, as a dialogue between the two, resulting in something emplotted in both times. The (re)performance of a narrated remembrance ruptures the past/present dichotomy, created a unique narrative moment that reflects and inflects upon the ways we consider the associated memories. As Allison (1994) posits, our existence is measured narratively rather than via a temporal dichotomy—we live via story. If we understand this negotiation of time and repetition in reperformance as a mode of queer temporality—beyond the binary of the past and present of a given narrative event, and leaning into this new temporal gray area brought on by the recollection and subsequent (re)performance of an interviewee’s narratives—the participants of an oral history exist within a queer time. This is a muddled and extended moment, demarcated by repetition and the possibility of momentary negotiations of meaning within (re)performances of their stories.

If the storytelling moment is to be a dialogic performance, then queer oral history must take stock of the body’s presence and importance; first by acknowledging the embodied actions on the part of the interviewee, and then by accounting for the researcher’s body in the interview event and subsequent reperformances when applicable. Boyd and Ramirez (2012) look to the importance of the body as a site of knowing, asserting that “the sexuality of the body (or bodily desire) is an important, indeed material, aspect of the practice of doing oral history” (p. 3). They

also look at the body's influence on the storytelling event, citing Gluck & Patai's (1977) claim that "oral history among women is a 'feminist encounter,' even if the narrator has no personal or political investment in feminism per se" (p. 5) due to the ways that placing value on the words and lived experiences of women opposes masculinist power structures.

Proposing Queer Oral History

If bodily desire is an important aspect of practicing oral history, then it stands to reason that an oral history interview between two queer-identified individuals is a queer encounter, and in turn may constitute a certain kind of queer oral history; however, I find myself wanting more than queer subjectivity from a queer view of oral history. How can we lean into a theoretical queerness that goes beyond a traditional subjectivity? What can we gain from considering ways to methodologically queer oral history, and how can this queering get us closer to a more holistic interpretation of dialogic performance between researcher and subject? I propose two questions that may lead us to a queer method of oral history practice. First, I consider Boyd's (2008) title question, "Who is the subject?" but push beyond questioning traditional participants to also include interrogating and embracing the researcher's role as subject. Second, I look to the perceived necessity for or acknowledged impossibility of methodological purity; I believe that, through introducing a multi-method approach rooted within oral history, we can queer oral history itself, allowing it to be both an archival representation of subject and a dialogue including the researcher, more fully addressing the possibilities of what queer oral history could look like.

The oral historians that Boyd offers throughout her 2008 article look to the question of subjectivity in different ways. Many of them, as noted above, are saturated in the possibility that oral history may not only archive a community, but also somehow serve it. This service can be construed from multiple perspectives but is often situated in that impetus to archive and

represent. Dependent upon one's view as to whether or not an oral history of a marginalized group constitutes a kind of performative activism, one may see the value of oral history's work differently in this service. This service-oriented impulse seems to rise from the points that Boyd brings up regarding the ways oral historians often make sense of themselves through the study of others with whom they may identify in one or more ways. The oral historian in these instances may already be a member of or related to the subject community, and in turn, have a vested interest in serving the community to which they also belong.

Leaning into this notion of the in-group or member/observer role of some oral historians, I further Boyd's question with a claim. Some oral historians seek to make sense of themselves to a point that they, too, become subjects of their research. While this is often a tacit inclusion, not spoken on the page or the stage, the reality of the inclusion still persists through the oral historian's choice of content, framing of narratives, and interview practices. As my interviewee points out, it also results in a feeling of "you are one of us," which changes the outcome of each interview and the oral history as a whole.

In the narrative event of the interview, two bodies are present, each with pre-established vocabularies of feeling and movement built from a lifetime of lived experiences and knowledge sets carried within them. Each body's history—both participant and researcher—changed the outcome of the interview and the lenses through which the interviews are interpreted or presented. As such, each body is a subject of the study. Acknowledging this multi-embodied narrative process troubles more traditional notions of researcher and subject, and in turn, offers us a queerer way to view the narrative event. Similarly to the ways in which the (re)narratization process instigated through the interview presents a tension of time, the relationship within the queer oral history interview presents a tensive question: who is/are the subject(s)?

Embracing this tension as a site of productivity is essential to what I propose as a queer praxis of oral history. Leaning in to my own qualifications for the topic of the oral history, I embrace an extrapolation of Harry Hay's (1996) notion of a subject-subject consciousness through my role as researcher. Hay articulates this subject-subject relationality as a mode of understanding a same-sex relationship in contrast to the subject-object associations of a heterosexual relationship. He asserts that many heterosexual couplings rely on the objectification of the feminine partner, whereas same-sex relationships rely on a mutual empathy that pushes back against the "normative" power differential of heterosexual objectification. By leaning into the sameness between the people who I interview and myself, I try to further this subject-subject consciousness into the praxis of a researcher and oral historian, resulting in a queer(er) practice of oral history that leans into tensive questions that trouble the notion of who may be the subject of a study. Within this conception of self as oral history researcher, I view myself as a subject-researcher—an agent that functions both as the researcher but also acknowledges and participates in the ways that they may function as a participant of the given study.

I see this as a natural extension of the discussions of subjectivity presented by current and past queer oral history practitioners, going beyond the discussions of framing, selection, and in-group service to a full acknowledgment that the oral historian, too, is part of the subjectivity of the practice. This productive and tensive threshold can push the oral history performer closer to a dialogic act of performance by simply acknowledging that the storytelling event is a dialogic communicative act. Both subject and subject-researcher are present; both are listening, processing, and reacting; and both ultimately have some consequence on the outcome of the interview and the resultant oral history. In this interaction, both identities matter—as my subject

in the above narrative points out. There may be similarities and differences to attend to, but the dialogic aims of the historian/performer should engage and acknowledge both. From a perspective of theoretical queerness, these both/and thresholds of similarity/difference and subject/researcher make sense, but practitioners may still wonder how to mobilize those tensions as informative sites for their methodological practice. How do we effectively queer the method in demonstrable ways that can then be utilized in oral history performance? The answer, at least in terms of my proposition, lies in applying this queer thinking not only to the ways in which we orient to the interview event, but to the practice of method as well.

Methodological impurity.

In order to offer a queer practice of oral history methods, I find myself turning to methods that feel related in some way. I look into my proverbial methodological toolbox and see what might work well alongside oral history, what methods “play well” together. I bear in mind Conquergood’s (1985) call for dialogic performance, and seek ways to push my own practice further towards this ideal. I consider my productivity and in terms of both identity and my positionality as subject-researcher. Within the framework of oral history, these considerations lead me to methods that can offer performative representations of what it may mean to queer oral history. First, I look to examples of performed oral histories that performance practitioners have moved from transcripts or pages to the stage. Then I look to everyday life performance (ELP) as a way to negotiate the imperative ethical dimensions of performing oral history in a way that accounts for the different embodied knowledges of participants and subject-researcher. Finally, I turn to autoethnography as a method that exemplifies the potentialities of loosening boundaries between subject and researcher.

Performing oral history.

Many performance-based projects that could utilize the terminology of an oral history seem to have been labeled ethnography despite a more interview-oriented (as opposed to observational) nature. Castro (2015) offers a requirement of ethnography: “a researcher spending an extended amount of time in a culture or society . . .” (p. 1). Conversely, definitions of oral history rely on the importance of interview and document. As K’Meyer and Crothers (2007) define oral history, it is “a co-created document that combines the narrator’s version of his or her story with the results of the historian’s effort to illuminate the context of the narrator’s life and the connections between his or her story and broader historical theme” (p. 83).

Whether or not an oral history or interview-based project is adapted for the stage, most oral histories look very similar to a performance script. A hallmark of the method is that parts of the interviews are selected and shown as a nearly untouched representation of the storytelling event. As such, textually, oral history often looks like a collection of monologues—comprised of multi-paragraph pieces of text that are attributed to a specific speaker. To revisit Pollock’s (2005) observation, “oral historians and performance scholars/practitioners are increasingly discovering shared and complementary investments . . .” (p. 1). The resemblance between oral history and performance is such that some scholars (Kellin, 2005) even suggest using oral history transcripts to devise performances for educational purposes, and others still have used this interview-to-monologue format as the crux of creation for their own work (Smith, 1991, 1994). These performances, then, follow in a tradition of what Piscator and Brecht would refer to as “epic theatre”—theatre that rises to address contemporary political issues with an emphasis on audience response and active engagement (Brecht, 1964; Wiles, 1980). More specifically, they fall into work that is looked at as “documentary theatre,” using pre-existing artifacts and

transcripts to construct a performance. This in turn often offers the voice of the everyday person as a window to understand historical, temporal, or regional issues (Taylor, 2010). Most performances of oral history can also be understood through the lens of “verbatim theatre”—a theatrical form that strives for (re)performance of often untouched transcripts or other source material. Anna Deavere Smith (1991, 1994) is notable for offering solo verbatim theatre work, but perhaps the most popularly known examples of verbatim theatre are produced by Moises Kaufmann’s Tectonic Theatre Project, especially Kaufmann’s (2000) work, *The Laramie Project*. Like other verbatim theatre, documentary theatre, and oral history work, *The Laramie Project* is a script constructed of interviews which were (re)performed in the original production by the people who conducted the research. In terms of oral history, the (re)performance is one productive site of methodological queering.

Walter Benjamin (1969) points out that “the storyteller takes what he [*sic*] tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale” (p. 3). If the storyteller is the interviewee and the listener is the interviewer, (re)performance by the subject-researcher makes explicit the implicit phenomenological relationship that Benjamin points to. Through this (re)performance, the subject-researcher experiences some version of the story that is told to them, creating an embodied version of what Benjamin refers to as making it the experience of the listener. Again, we see time ruptured through the narratization of an event, moving us beyond mere recollection, into a restaging that is at once past and present; we move into what Allison (1994) calls a way of *storyliving*—constructing knowledge and reality through the act of narrative making. We utilize the act of narratization to make sense of the past (the storytelling event), and in turn contextualize the present and future through the narrative event on stage (Bauman, 1986). We

continue to trouble questions of subjectivity; even if the narratives performed do not originate from the subject-researcher, theirs is the body on stage performing the narrative. The narrative becomes read and understood through the lens of their body, and they become an integral part of the *storyliving* process for themselves, the audience, and the malleable living narrative. Through enacting a body that is not their own, the performer layers the experiences and knowledge systems of another, weaving these embodied histories and knowledges with their own. By accessing, in ways, the body of another, the performer may interpret an embodied epistemology—an insight into the ways that the interviewee’s body and experience act as a genesis for knowledge about the world and culture(s) they exist within. The performer becomes both subject and medium for the research, negotiating a rich and complex role in the interpretation of the different and individualized epistemologies at play in the performative moments of the interview and (re)performance.

Everyday life performance (ELP).

The performer’s body is present in the performance, but how does one also account for the bodies of the interviewees? Clearly they should not be abandoned at the interview or within the script; as we have established, the body offers insights into expression, meaning, and knowledge carried within each individual subject. Additionally, attending to embodied differences in performance is one way to push ourselves more fully towards the dialogic performance ideal. Attending to the body of the other within performance offers the possibility for deeper understanding as well as a more holistically realized performance of the interviewee. In order to account for the variety of bodies associated with oral history practice and represent them through performance, I turn to everyday life performance (ELP).

Stucky (2002) calls for performance studies to nurture an ability to present the everyday

aspects of performance through what Robert Hopper (1993) coins as “everyday life performance,” seemingly embracing Pelias & Van Oosting’s (1987) call to consider the everyday an aspect of social performance, and calls from others in the field to make use of increasingly wide inspirations to form performance scripts (Kleinau & McHughes, 1980). ELP is marked by its attention to verbal and embodied detail of a subject—in fact, Stucky (1993) encourages the ELP practitioner to consider transcripts and recordings as “two versions of the same script” (p. 178) in their pursuit of an embodied verisimilitude. A performance utilizing ELP may look similar to what one thinks of as a traditional oral history performance, but in the intense attention to detail it sets itself apart methodologically from some oral history and verbatim theatre approaches to performing interview-based scripts. ELP becomes useful for navigating the ethical dimensions of performing the other; if we represent them as they are, we counter risks of stereotyping or overdoing differences—falling to Conquergood’s (1985) pitfalls: the curator’s exhibitionism and/or the enthusiast’s infatuation. Simultaneously, we reduce the risk of under-emphasizing the difference and washing it away; seen in the pitfalls of the skeptic’s cop-out and the custodian’s rip-off. A careful navigation of embodiment that avoids the pitfalls pushes us further towards that dialogic place where we can hold similarity and difference in the simultaneity of embodied dialogue. ELP also has great utility as it offers a tool by which the performer can account for the body of the other through performance. As discussed above, the body is an important site of knowing; it offers deeper and different interpretations than a transcript alone can (Peterson & Langellier, 2009). The body offers both researcher and subject-researcher moments of connection and dialogue in the initial storytelling event, and by attending to the body in the stages of preparation through review and recreation of audio and video recording, the performer is able to offer an audience those same dialogic insights. Introducing

ELP to oral history becomes one way to do this—as it takes stock of movement, posture, voice, etc. It allows the performer to offer a holistic view of their participants in ways that simultaneously carry the affect of and access to their own body (the performer's) and their newly-assumed performative body (the (re)performance of the interviewee). This in turn becomes a further site for dialogue to take place, as the dialogue of the interview ruptures its somewhat contained temporality and lights upon the researcher/performer's body as a site of negotiation. The temporal site in turn creates opportunities for deeper access to the embodied epistemologies of the traditional subject by forcing the performer to consider aspects of the interview in a way they might not have if the oral history were left strictly on the page.

If the oral history performer/practitioner is to truly acknowledge a mutual subjectivity with their interviewees, they must also account for how to incorporate themselves as a producer of narrative text. While interviewing oneself may provide an entertaining experiment, I look specifically to methods that already engage with the ways that the researcher themselves can function as the producer of narrative data.

Autoethnography.

With these questions about the manifestation of the role of subject-researcher within a queer oral history, I begin to wonder, how do we represent this new role on that page or the stage as part of the oral history? In order to reflexively include the self, I turn to other autoethnographers to find exemplars, using their words about relationality to guide my own introduction of autoethnography into oral history.

Autoethnographies ask us to write politically, aesthetically, culturally and personally at once (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and to frame our lives and lived experiences both theoretically and analytically (Adams, 2011). As Boylorn (2013) points out, autoethnography acknowledges that

our stories are not merely our own, but are culturally situated—influenced by and influencing others. In short, our own lived experiences are already in dialogue with the lived experiences of others; autoethnographers such as Boylorn (2013), Berry (2016), and Jones & Harris (2015) show us that autoethnography sees this dialogue as a tensive and productive place worth pursuing and representing within our texts.

Within the practice of oral history, a subject-researcher may look to this same tensive place and choose to represent their lived experiences alongside those of traditional participants. By doing so, we fully acknowledge the role of subject-researcher placing our narratives within the same document or performance as the narratives of our participants. Boylorn (2013) models what this may look like within autoethnography by placing herself within the community she grew up in; her stories and the stories around her are saturated in a specific culture and community that she once belonged to. By pointing to her own insider/outsider dialectic, Boylorn is able to illuminate the social and political history through her complex relationship to it. Similarly, Berry (2016) uses his own experiences with his thematic topic, bullying, to highlight, interpret, and emphasize the experiences of his participants. Within each chapter, Berry not only offers analysis of the narratives offered by his participants, but also becomes a subject himself by sharing personal, self-reflexive narratives that correspond to the narratives shared by those participants.

The oral historian may do the same, especially in instances where some shared identity codifies them as part of the community they study. In my interview at the beginning of this chapter, my own Southernness and queerness cued me into a relationship with my participant that I may not otherwise have had; it offered me an embodied dialogue that would not have existed without my own intersectional identifications. To acknowledge and embrace the importance of

that is to queer my role as researcher and embrace a more nuanced role as subject-researcher. In order to make that explicit on the page and stage, however, I propose that we further queer the method and the subjectivity of the study through the use of autoethnography. By offering narration of our own reflexive lived experiences—including our experiences at the storytelling event, we support dialogue between our participants’ narratives and ourselves by highlighting connections and acknowledging differences within their lives and our own.

As I reflect on my practice of queering oral history using autoethnography, I notice some limitations; namely, the disparity of narrative control between the storytelling event of the interview and the act of sitting down to write autoethnographic reflections inspired by those interviews. While there is definitely some vulnerability in autoethnographic writing, the access to control and revision is something that is not generally afforded to an interviewee. Further, as Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) articulates, autoethnography calls for a certain kind of craft, in particular “a fairly commonsense conception of literary craft—particularly of the poetic” (306). Conversely, though, autoethnography asks for the researcher to consider themselves reflexively—to acknowledge not only oppressions or anecdotes, but their place and participation within hegemonic systems, to offer connections between themselves and their world as they used lived experience to theorize the ways in which we communicate and understand identity (or other topics that may be the subject of a given piece of autoethnographic research). Ultimately, then, this does not exactly mirror the experience of the interviewees, offering a nuanced approach that in seemingly small but powerful ways differentiates the idea of subject-researcher from interviewee or subject.

Impurity in Practice.

In my own practice, I have employed this methodological impurity in the hope of

offering one possible model for those who wish to practice queer oral history. For *Bless Our Hearts: An Oral History of the Queer South* (hereafter simplified as *Bless Our Hearts*), I conducted interviews like the one with Joan, described above. I took both audio and video recordings in addition to compiling the textual transcripts of eleven interviews. Once I had the transcripts, I went through them for broad themes—religion, sexuality, coming out, etc. I filed individual narratives within the storytelling event into those categories in order to put them in conversation with one another and prompt my own narratives of lived experience. After the coding process, I started to introduce disparate methods. As I created a script from the interviews, I would draft autoethnographic narratives of my own, creating a textual dialogic connection between my experiences as a queer Southerner and the experiences of those whom I had interviewed. By reflexively including my own narratives, I position myself alongside my interviewees as an additional subject, in a version of Hay’s (1996) articulation of a “subject-subject consciousness.” In placing these narratives next to each other, I hope to find conversational links while simultaneously acknowledging that there is no one ontological “Southernness”—no one experience that makes or breaks the consistent self-identification of my participants as Southern. Through showing a conversation of both similarity and difference, my hope was to create a tapestry that showed diverse approaches and rationale for what a queer Southerner is or could be.

Once the scripting process was complete, I introduced performative methods to the text, using ELP practices to inform my depictions of my fellow participants as I navigated the double bind of erasure and sensationalism that comes with representing others for an audience. In doing this, I had to continue to reflexively consider the position of my own narratives alongside the narratives of those I had interviewed, while also expressly attending not only my own body, but

bodies very different from my own. Throughout the process, I felt tensions as I reviewed the video tapes of my interviews and (re)performed them; what does it mean to carry a trans man's chest binding? A trans woman's breast implants? The effect of 50 years beyond my own on Joan's body? I found that the negotiation towards the dialogic carries through the entire process once these methods are introduced as part of the praxis of queer oral history. **Chapter Previews**

This dissertation expands and clarifies the queer nuancing of oral history methodology I propose by using my own experiences and methodological experiments as a model in a way that I hope is useful for researchers and performers. The dissertation is centered on my own work with *Bless Our Hearts*. Using that process as a centerpiece, I further define the distinctiveness of queer oral history, illuminate the potentials of this methodology, and offer a model for those who may wish to take on the mantle of employing queer oral history. In addition to its methodological considerations and discussions, this document also serves as an oral history itself—the script in Chapter Three offering a select archive of diverse and vibrant queer Southerners.

This document is structured into a five-chapter format, employing a mixture of writing styles that pull from my qualitative training. Primarily the document functions as an account of this project—offering both a traceable line of thought and an archive of my own process, from idea to performance to dissertation. This first chapter introduces the project as a whole, including a review of the literature surrounding oral history and a proposal of what queer oral history is or could be.

The second chapter offers personal context, using autoethnography to theorize and explicate the importance of regional identity as an aspect of intersectionality; this consideration was the genesis for the project, and in turn offers the impetus towards the dialogue that characterizes the method I am working to propose. Positioning myself in this way and making a

scholarly case for regional identity as central to intersectionality is imperative for both the relationship I have to the project as subject-researcher as well as for my desire to archive this version of the queer South.

The third chapter outlines my process in creating the script for the show *Bless Our Hearts*. This discussion includes both practical and ethical concerns of scripting an aesthetic text from the interviews of a diverse group of queer individuals; I focus on the ways that I chose to represent the simultaneous dialogue of similarity and difference through the show in a way that represents the textual impurities proposed in Chapter One. This chapter concludes with the performance script—both a model of queer oral history and an archival oral history itself.

The fourth chapter offers a reflection on the staging process for the show, explaining and explicating the challenges and choices I made regarding embodiment as I actualized my experiment with queer oral history. In this chapter, I discuss the ways that I locate the dialogue central to queer oral history within the body during reperformance of interviewees and also look to the ways the bodies of interviewees interact with opportunities to reperform the central (re)performance of *Bless Our Hearts*.

The fifth and final chapter offers conclusions and directions forward. Offering a review of my articulations of queer oral history, this chapter focuses on acknowledging the realities and limitations of my project and addresses what queer oral history may look like outside of the context of *Bless Our Hearts*. Finally, it offers my own potential directions forward with this new nuance to methodology while also offering a call to others to take up the mantle of queer oral history as a way to generate dialogic performance work of the other.

As I grew up in the Bible Belt stronghold of Alabama, I was repeatedly told that a queer man could never teach, could never have a family, could never do this or do that. Through queer

oral history, I seize the ability, as Johnson (2008) says, to corroborate and validate narratives that directly refute these harmful fallacies. By creating a dialogic connection between my participants and myself, I am able to archive, serve, and represent a thriving community of diverse queer folk from across the South, queer folk who are doing things in the world and finding their own self-actualization through inspiring means. I am able to create a conversation that holds both our similarities and the ontological diversity of queer Southern-ness. The queer oral history that I propose and model offers a dialog, not only between participants and researchers but also including textual and performative audiences who enter the conversation, open to the simultaneity of difference and similarity.

CHAPTER 2

FINDING MY FRONT PORCH: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF QUEER SOUTHERN INTERSECTIONS

According to polls conducted by GLAAD (Violence Against..., 2019), people polled in Southern states show more discomfort than those in other regions when asked questions such as “Are you comfortable seeing a gay co-worker’s wedding picture,” or “Are you comfortable electing a gay politician?” Half of GLAAD’s respondents in Southern states would object to bringing a child to a same-sex wedding. Almost all of the states seen as Southern in GLAAD’s study have no workplace protections for LGBTQ+ individuals, and in the case of Mississippi, have approved a “License to Discriminate” bill that allows businesses to refuse to hire or serve LGBTQ+ people.

In 2016 The Williams Institute provided statistics that show support for LGBTQ+ individuals in the South was rising—in spite of prejudice, lack of legal protections, and even discriminatory legislative policies (LGBT in the South). Even with all of this, they note that, with 35% of LGBTQ+ U.S. Americans living in the Southern states, the South has a greater percentage of LGBTQ+ individuals than any other region of the United States.

The South has its own culture—as evidenced by statistics as well. Southern states forefront religion: Southerners are 15% more likely to believe the U.S. should be governed as a Christian nation and 17% more likely to believe that Christ will return to Earth than the rest of the U.S. (Morin, 1996). Gun ownership in the South statistically outpaces the rest of the nation as well; 36% of Southern adults own a gun, which is more than double the gun owner percentage of the Northeast (Parker, et. al., 2017).

The flatly characterized Christ-influenced South that loves guns is something I am not

familiar with; it's the part of the South that fuels snarky online posts about how terrible Alabama is, or memes that make jokes of incest or a history of slavery at the South's expense. The South is an imperfect place, and it always has been, but it's also the place that I came from. It's a place that I have always had a complicated relationship to, but it's a place that always welcomes me back to the porch with humid air hugging my shoulders and a glass of sweet tea in my hand.

I sought to understand the South more, my own space within it, and the ways that LGBTQ+ folks thrive in the South in spite of regressive politics and policies, so I organized the oral history project that became this dissertation. In order to understand how I arrive at both the show, *Bless Our Hearts*, and in turn my articulation of queer oral history, it is important to understand my own positionality. As such, this chapter offers various autoethnographic accounts of my time growing up in the South, the tensions that I felt with the region, and my own journey to reconciling my queerness and Southernness as a starting point to illustrate how I relate to this project and those I interviewed. This relationship, in turn, becomes very important to the ways I experiment with and outline my own tenets of queer oral history practice.

“Sally bay-ung-duh the bla-yuck Pack-errrd into the taxi-cah-yub,” the student before me drawls. I am standing in a line of theatre students. I shake my head, frustrated at the amount of time it is going to take before my high school theatre teacher—Edyth Jane Krupko Brown—passes those in front of me through the elocution exercise and I can have my turn. “Sally bay-ung-duh—“ Krupko cuts them off with a violent shake of her head, her heavy mahjong-tile earrings swaying violently. “The bla-yuck—“ another violent shake of those tiles, pulling at her earlobes. This could go on forever. I sigh and return to my seat.

I know in that moment that when my turn comes, I will say, “Sally banged the black

Packard into the taxicab,” or whatever elocution exercise is offered to me as close to perfectly as possible, unlike the other “clods” in my class. They all have these thick, three-syllables-in-every-word, Alabama accents. I think, “Thank goodness I do not sound like that.”

It’s not that I have never had this accent; I grew up having it. I am, after all, from Alabama, and I lived in the state the first 24 years of my life. I worked hard not to have the drawl, not to seem in any outwardly perceivable way as Southern. At the time, I rationalized my desire to eradicate my accent as a reasonable response to the prejudices Southern U.S. Americans may face in the larger context of a globalizing workplace; those read as Southern are often assumed to be ignorant, simple-minded, or incapable. In reality though, there was a part of my identity that made me feel distinctly “Un-Southern”; I was queer, and I did not know how to reconcile my sexuality with my regional identity and upbringing.

My vocal performance—my accent—acted as a battle ground between different intersectional aspects of my identity. Intersectionality (Combahee, 1982) offers us a way to view identity in terms of the interacting “sections” that constitute our identities. Originally developed and used as a way for Black women to articulate the ways in which, for them, the oppressions facing Black individuals and the oppressions facing women are inseparable (Crenshaw, 1994), intersectionality can also be used to articulate different intersections of identity, at times even illustrating the complex and messy ways in which privilege and oppression may interact within and upon a singular body. Intersectionally, I acknowledge that my body and experiences carry both privilege and oppression. On one hand, I am white, abled, and male, but on the other, I am queer and grew up in a working-class family. As such, while I have experienced oppressions associated with some marginalized identities, I have also been afforded certain privileges as a

white, abled man moving through my own life and culture. While some assert that the white gay male is in some measure a newly privileged class (Shugart, 2003), that point of view ignores the complicated layers that can affect the intersectional positionality of gay men who may be marked not only with points of privilege but also further points of marginalization.

As I track my own sense-making processes about growing up queer in Alabama and the ways they affect me and my research today, I have turned my gaze outward and inward. This project, like the majority of my research and performance work, stems from a life of swaying wildly between deep identification and disidentification with my place of origin. The bulk of this document focuses on the solo show, *Bless Our Hearts*, but if I truly want to offer insight into the process of crafting that performance, I have to reflexively offer an account of myself, an account of how I came to that performance. That account starts with the tense geographic and temporal space of my own coming-of-age as a queer in the South.

As a way to engage the tensions I felt (and feel) between my Southern and Queer identities, I have chosen to engage my lived experiences as data through autoethnography. Ellis & Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as “autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation” (p. 38). Autoethnography, then, must tell the personal but go beyond the singular to situate memoir in theory and analysis (Adams, 2011), finding ways in which our individual experiences may resonate with larger narratives (Boylorn, 2013). By layering this reflexive introspective writing with my own theorizations about my experiences, I use this chapter to show the genesis of this project. I use my own tense identity as queer and Southern as a case study to make the argument that regional identity is an important and overlooked consideration of intersectional identity.

I realized, at least internally, my queer identity during my early teen years. Living in Alabama, embracing my emergent queer identity and my ingrained Southern identity in one body was a challenging performance to negotiate as a young teen. Eventually, I would not be able to simply sublimate that part—the queer part—of my identity anymore; I had to act. Dating—something nearly every teenager seems to pursue, a cultural site of exploring those burgeoning sexual identities—felt especially different as a queer Southern teen. While football players “went out” with cheerleaders or the guy who was good at math dated the first-chair flute player, my queer friends and I were resigned to a slimmer dating pool, one that often meant illegal relationships with those significantly older than us.

For my queer friends and me, there were not a lot of visible gay people in my hometown, but we would hear stories of the people who were a couple of years older than us. With a lack of representation of queer individuals in the media available to us (and even fewer representations that offered images or performance scripts of queer Southerners), these people became the social construction of queer performance in our small town (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). We made friends with these older people--one year older, then through them two years older, and so on until we were face-to-face with those “queers who came before” that we had heard so much about.

Even with the growing difference I felt, I was still compelled to behave as normatively as my desires would allow; I, too, needed to enter the dating pool, that site of teenage exploration and identity negotiation. As many people do, I had my first boyfriend, Matt, when I was fifteen. I first heard about him when I was thirteen and a freshman at band camp. People told me that I was like him; we both had effervescent personalities and liked to sing showtunes and Disney

songs. I went to my friend Bianca, excited, thinking this meant that I somehow belonged to the club—I had found my place in the daunting and quickly encroaching landscape of high school.

“I’m not sure that’s a good thing...” she said, with a bit of side-eyed expression. “The last time I saw him he had pierced ears and bright red hair.” I had neither pierced ears nor dyed hair. As a freshman I didn’t fully understand my queerness yet, but the comparisons I drew to Matt and his performance(s) of identity retrospectively show me the ways I was beginning to embody a performance perceived as queer by those around me. A performance that also seemed to transgress the conservative landscape I inhabited.

Often, as I reflect on narratives from my past, I have to ask myself, “What seems particularly Southern about this?” It’s a hard question to answer, but I think the interview participants discussed more at length through the body of this document answer it aptly, in a way. When asked about their own experiences—“Was it hard growing up queer in the South?” etc.—they usually responded with some variation of, “Well ... it’s all I’ve ever known.” That is also true of my experiences and of me.

Surely there are other places that have similar conservative cultural expectations and other queer people who are not from the South with similar experiences and feelings to mine. As with many things in performance studies, though, I return to the ideas of text and voice. As I write about the South, I am a queer Southern writer—an identity that took me a while to find but became my road and my respite. The Southern writer is entrenched in the language and voices they are surrounded by; as O’Connor (1988) notes, “The South impresses its image on the Southern writer from the moment he [sic] is able to distinguish one sound from another.” She continues to tie this even more concretely to the voice and accent of Southerners, “He [sic] takes

it in through his ears and hears it again in his own voice” (p. 855).

My own negotiation of what it could mean to be queer and Southern happened internally, but it became an external battle between two seemingly disparate aspects of my self. The battle happened in private rooms, in cars with friends and romantic interests, and it happened in my voice and posture. I tried to mitigate my public performances to match what was expected of a normative (read: straight) Southern boy. I tried to deepen my voice, to get rid of that dreaded tell-tale sign of my sexuality “the gay voice” (Thorpe, 2014). It produced a fine line—a hard negotiation—I didn’t want to sound like one of what I thought of as the “rednecks” at my school, but I didn’t want to sound like myself either. All I knew was that I desperately needed to pass; however, in order to do that, I had to sublimate my own same-sex attraction and interests that might be read as gay, queer, or questionable to clandestine spaces.

A little over a year later, Matt—the man whom I had reminded some older students of—came to my birthday party as a guest of my slightly older friend Michelle. Matt worked in the photo lab at Target and as a spotlight operator for the gay bar forty minutes away. He smoked and he drank. I was not particularly attracted to him, but I wanted him to like me; he represented what older kids always seem to represent to younger kids: maturity, danger, and something new. He was a socially out gay man (Adams, 2011), complete with the associations that carried, including the shame and the stigma (Goffman, 1963; Herek, 2004). I had begun to realize at least some of my sexuality; despite the drawbacks, I was eager to “try on” my nascent identity.

Matt told Michelle after my party that I had gotten “cute” since the last time he saw me. He liked my style and my new faux-hawk—part of my updated commitment to what I perceived as a “proper” queer performance. His comments rewarded my following of this script—even in this

queer subcultural sense. Michelle was thrilled at the opportunity to match-make two friends. She set up a date. About a week after I turned 15, I went on a first date with a 20-year-old man to Ruby Tuesday. A few weeks later, he took me to my first “adult” party. It was Halloween; we dressed as an “emo couple”—black clothes, eyeliner, and an abundance of kitschy Hot Topic accessories. This costume was . . . not far from the truth of my life, to be honest. There was liquor, but I didn’t drink. We brought a cookie cake to the party and wound up sharing most of it between ourselves.

Afterwards, we couldn’t go back to my house or his house—neither of us was “out” of the closet to our families (Sedgwick, 1980; Adams, 2011), and we both lived with our parents. Instead, we shared quiet moments in his PT Cruiser in the parking lot of the Wal-Mart Supercenter. Among stolen, too-wet kisses and hands grappling with me and the center console, he breathily told me, “You taste just like cookie cake.” I’m still not sure if that meant he liked it or not. If I’m being honest, I knew that I did not particularly enjoy it. I felt the firm rubbery plastic of the PT Cruiser pushing into my ribcage; his hot and too-wet mouth on my ear; a sense of shame, a Christ-haunting “God-sees-all” kind of shame. But a man was paying attention to me! And as someone beginning to physicalize the now in-progress realization of my queer identity, this was all that mattered in that moment. I was subverting everything that was expected of me, all of the mandates that I felt placed upon me by family, community, and region, but his hands, mouth, and attention were all that mattered in that moment.

Growing up in the South has informed the ways I engage with my queer identity—especially in notably Southern contexts, such as my entirely Southern family. Even now, I say I am not “technically out” to my family; that is to say we have never had a formal conversation

about my sexuality. Still though, despite certain events that should have led to her knowledge of my queer identity, my mother consistently references the future days, “when you have a wife.” These communications of non-acceptance are not uncommon from those who may have trouble accepting the sexuality of a loved one (Adams, 2013), but they are still complicated by the conversations I have not had.

When questioned about my lack of “out-ness,” I have often explained that the denial of one’s sexual identity from a loved one is a powerful force. I have spoken with many queer Southerners who similarly find that their family’s denial or similar orientations to their sexuality result in a kind of “blind eye” protocol—we won’t discuss it and neither should you. This denial and subsequent refusal to engage the holistic queer person is exacerbated in the face of a culture that does not necessarily “understand” queer identities. Confronted with something we are culturally unable to process, we often erase and/or replace that thing with a “stand-in” (Halberstam, 1995) in an intellectual act that is not dissimilar to performances of passing or covering (Yoshino, 2006). In my case, my evolving sexual identity was not fully understood by the dominant culture, and was even more perplexing to the conservative, Christian, Southern culture I was situated in. Due to this misunderstanding and sometimes hostile unfamiliarity, those engaging my sexuality erased it and replaced with something that was understandable—heterosexuality, or the normative identity. As a result of this erasure/replacement of my queer identity, I felt forced into disidentification (Muñoz, 1999) with my culture of origin. In this context and in terms of performing my sexuality, the erasure and disidentification created a few complicated domino effects; notably, it works to reinforce the strength of “the closet” (Adams, 2011; Sedgwick, 1980) as a social construction that is not necessarily chosen, but in this case, placed upon an individual.

When it was convenient, I would encourage this closet by substituting an identity that was not my own by performing both normative Southern male and heterosexual scripts in order to “pass” (Blackmer, 1995; Larsen, 1929) as something that I was not. Discussing women celebrities in sexually objectifying ways, wearing the polo shirts that were the straight “prep” uniform of the time, and making crude and homophobic jokes that would make me cringe today were all, at different times, my attempts at this passing performance. My attempts to pass came as a result of the frictions I felt between my developing queer identity and my geographic and self-identification as a Southerner. As Yoshino (2006) articulates, I “covered” my queer identity, “tone[d] down a disfavored identity to fit [into what was, for me] the mainstream” (p. IX).

The closet felt placed upon me in many different facets of life—essentially all the facets aside from my closest friends, who were often queer women. The importance of maintaining the closet through a passing performance felt as if it would directly affect my public life, my academic success, and most importantly my family. In fact, my family—most specifically my mother—is where I often felt the most importance placed on “fitting in,” a phrase that I understood as an articulation of the importance of my perceived heterosexuality. This kind of imposed closeting does not always come from a place of hate, but as described above, it sometimes comes from misunderstanding, concern, or even love. Once, during a time my mother suspected that I might identify as gay, she indirectly expressed fears about me facing the associated stigma that exists within the Southern contexts she knows. She warned me, “If you’re gay, you’ll never be able to teach.” Yes, her assessment of my potential future was grounded in the prejudices that had constructed her conceptions of queer identity, but they also came from that place of concern and love for her child and the knowledge that to be queer in both larger and Southern society meant dealing with very particular frictions that could bar me from my goals in

life.

Much like the interview participants referenced earlier in this chapter and Chapter One, the South and its response to queerness was all my mother had known when she made, and in some ways participated in, statements like “You’ll never teach.” The Southern context of her life and her own existence inextricably ties her knowledge and attitudes to the (Southern) place(s) she knows; the interactions of her own identities and geographic space create a certain knowledge of the (Southern) world, and the way people should be within it. This link between place and ways of being are epistemic for her in ways not dissimilar from my own. In response to these kinds of seemingly protective closetings, it became easy for me to perform and reaffirm the closet that my family and my culture made for me; it was easy to accept the closet and answer with my own covering of queer identity. One may perform what is expected of them in exchange for cultural rewards (Butler, 1990) and in my case community and familial acceptance (Wellard, 2002) were such rewards.

Reinforcement: Four Moments of Cultural Closeting

1. Expectation and Modification

One morning when I was in high school, on a weekend when my sister (who is twelve years older) was visiting, I awoke to her thick accent traveling down the hallway to my bedroom from the kitchen. Our house is small, and my bedroom is at one end. Despite its location in the extremity of our home, if someone is speaking and the rest of the house is quiet, it doesn’t matter where they are, I can hear it in my bedroom. I lay there awake but not yet moving. I listened as I heard my sister express the ways in which she had prayed for me, visiting on me the kind of Christ-haunting intervention that is always disguised as well-wishing. Specifically, she prayed “really hard” that I not grow up to be fat or gay. In some way or another, I now embody both.

Often when people find out that I am queer and from Alabama, they immediately express, “Oh wow! That must have been hard!” I never know how to respond to that statement, because being a queer youth in Alabama is the only set of experiences I have ever had. Sure, I dealt with stigma and the uncertainty of realizing an identity that takes many years to come to terms with, but I imagine that is part of queer experiences everywhere.

Queer in Alabama might stick out a bit more, where male-read bodies are expected to embrace certain things—accents, boots, a very conservative masculinity. When I first started to realize my sexuality, I tried to perform the “preppy redneck” that seemed to be approved by my peers. I wore polo shirts, cheap denim jeans, and workman-like shoes. I was not good at that.

When this denim-performance began to chafe too much, I began to perform “creative.” I wore eclectic accessories, strange hats, and a lot of black. With this, many of my peers could shrug off the queer aspects of my body, my affectations, and my performance and dismiss me as “artistic” and not gay. Once, emerging from a hotel room at a marching band competition, I was wearing a collection of black and red bracelets, a rock band tee shirt with a blazer over it, and a strip of red fabric re-purposed into a necktie. I felt edgy and punk-rock. The band moms praised the outfit, saying that I looked like I belonged on a college campus; as someone who had always seen education as my way out of a small town, I immediately thought of this as a compliment.

2. Encouraging and Policing

As a child I was given a tee-ball set. I was given a baseball glove. I was given a football, baseballs, and mountain bikes. Eventually I was put in karate lessons so that I would know how to defend myself. I don’t know if my parents had realized by first grade, when I started karate, that I was not a “normal” boy. The tee-ball set faded, left in the sun. The baseball glove was

forgotten at a friend's house. Footballs, baseballs, karate gear were all met with a pasted on thankful smile that masked a frowning indifference, a seed planted in my core that seemed to resonate a consistent mantra, "They don't understand you."

Culturally, we tend to punish those who do not meet preconceived notions of what it is we should be, do, or perform. Our culture may encourage us to ignore parts of person's identity in a bid to accept the person as "whole"; we may ignore that person altogether; or we may mock, ridicule, shun, and exclude them based on a transgressive identity marker or performance. As a Southern boy, I was not always interested in what dominant performance scripts told me I should be interested in. Athletic equipment always gathered dust in my toy box while the dolls that were hand-me-downs from a much older sister routinely got new makeup or their hair washed in the bathroom sink. One time, I was excited about a Little Mermaid game I had received as a prize from a fast food meal or a cereal box; I started to espouse this happy news to my more traditionally masculine friend before my mother stopped me and softly shook her head, signaling me to keep this secret. Other boys should not know about my excitement for an under the sea adventure with Ariel the mermaid. Either I exclude my own interests, or the implication is that society will exclude me.

When I was 15, I went with a friend to her ballet class. We were there early, and since it was empty we stretched and warmed up together to a Sufjan Stevens CD—Seven Swans. I sat on the cold hardwood floor and watched my body stretch in the mirror. My friend, Rachel, was long and slender with a feminine body that could easily bend in two. I, on the other hand, heavily-handedly grasped my toes—also stretching but with much more effort due to my size and build. I felt like a brick of cold clay, un-malleable and stoic. Still though, she did not mind. The teacher saw me stretching and invited me to join the class for the day. I did. I enjoyed it. It was

strenuous. My body was stretched, my legs overused, my feet manipulated into strange angles, but the work felt right. The teacher offered to let me take classes for free—she explained that I learned fast, moved well, and that they always needed men for their recitals; the men in small-town Alabama were not interested in ballet, but I was! My mother said no. I don't remember why she told me that I couldn't. All I remember is thinking that it was her coded way of saying that I was different enough already, weird enough already . . . gay enough already. Performing myself as any more different from masculine Southern norms could warrant a harsher grade of cultural punishment. Once again, a protective closeting of interest, of performance, of sexuality, and of identity.

3. Surveillance and Harassment

I am lying in bed in the bedroom I had occupied for my entire life at this point. Next to my bed, there is a window that is mostly covered by a bush with red berries on it. When I was younger, I was always warned away, told never to eat them—they were poisonous. Instead, I would rub them between my hands into a pulpy red mash the color of the lipstick my grandmother always wore. Invariably, my mother would scold me when she saw the pungent red pigment staining my palms, my fingers, my cheeks. At night I always close my blinds, then draw my curtains tight. I did this to protect myself from those who might see in—the Boo Radleys of the world.

For several weeks during my freshman year of high school, late at night, around midnight to one o'clock, I would be lying in bed. Every couple of nights something would violently bang or flap against that same window—the one guarded by the poison berry bush. Sometimes whatever it was would use the branches of the berry tree to make eerie scraping noises, only to become more violent after it had my attention. By the time that I turned out the

light, pulled back the curtains, and opened the blinds, the creator of the noise would be gone.

For weeks after this stopped, my family would periodically receive phone calls around the same time of night. Sometimes I would answer and be asked really personal questions about my sexual practices. As a virgin, I had none yet, but I knew there was some truth to the way the mechanically modulated voice asked about whether or not I liked cock. My family would brush off whatever it was they might have heard, but that truth and that shame would stick inside me like a seed waiting to sprout. Another plot added to the garden that grew up over my closet door.

4. Association

When I entered high school, several of my friends came out of the closet. As a result, our small group grew significantly queerer than one would expect from a group of Alabama high school students. For the friends that I had known for years, my parents didn't take notice, but they did pay particular attention to the new additions to my social circle.

Upon seeing my friend Michelle, then a butch-identified lesbian and one of my best friends, my sister and mother both implored me not to hang out with someone who looked like they wanted to be a man. When I dated Matt, my mother saw him once. She told me not to spend time with him or people would think that I was like him.

To her, a queer bubble of friends was a terrible thing. That bubble repelled the teens who subscribed to more normative personal performances; it ostracized classmates who presented more acceptable heteronormative performances of gender and sexuality. To me, though, that queer bubble meant picnics on top of my lesbian friend's Volvo, showtune sing-alongs on three-way phone calls, private talks on a trampoline, and stolen cookie-cake kisses in parking lots. That bubble was a place to experiment, to figure it out, to unpack all of the tensions that I felt because of the confluence of my queer and regional identities.. To me that unexpected

queer bubble made life in the South tolerable.

I sit in an office, on the outside of the desk. I had just started a PhD program in Illinois—my first time living outside of my homestate, Alabama. “Where are you from?” my department chair and temporary advisor asks me.

“Alabama,” I state, simply.

“Well, I saw your file; I know you went to school there, but I mean where are you from?” I’m taken back by this clarification; I feel my eyebrows involuntarily furrow a bit in confusion and consideration.

“Alabama,” I state again, “18 years in Athens—North Alabama, then the past six in Tuscaloosa at the University of Alabama.” My entire residency can be listed so succinctly.

“Really?” I am met with unsurprising surprise, “Where’s your accent then?” This question I expect; I have conditioned myself to expect it almost anytime someone finds out that I spent my entire life so far in a state infamous for its thick drawl.

On a white man, that accent is read as

ignorant,

uneducated,

unknowing as

someone schooled in

segregated schools as

a pick-up truck adorned with stars

and bars, as having relatives behind bars

*as redneck,
as lower class,
as wifebeaters with
sunburnt skin and shotgun shacks.*

When I hear their thick honey-dipped tongues, others

hear lazy racists, and

sexists, and

homo-

phobes. Misguided Christians preaching fire and

brimstone at too-humid,

too-hot tent revivals.

A tin-cup cocktail of salvation and damnation. They hear

a tongue wrapped in

Klan robes and minds held still,

stagnant and sedentary in kudzu

foot-chains with the

steel weight of

history.

It's the tongue that

I heard

my grandfather's stories in;

the tongue that

my grandmother sang to me in;

the tongue that
my father read to me in;
the tongue that
my mother used tucking me in;
sweet dreams from
that honey-
dripping
tongue.

But

it wasn't

the tongue that

I wanted.

In high school, I sought out certain activities that would make me feel and seem less Southern. I immersed myself in contrasts based in the same stereotypes that guided me away from claiming my Southern identity. To me, two particular aspects of myself seemed completely incongruous. It seemed that performing a Southern identity meant not performing my growing queer identity. Knowing I could not change the becoming of my growing queerness, I chose to actively closet my Southernness . . . as much as one can in an Alabama high school. This meant throwing myself into the arts—leisure activities that I saw as a mark of affluence, things that I associated with bigger cities and metro areas. Theatre meant New York; music meant education; writing meant Parisian cafés; none of it meant the South.

The voice is so tied to regional identity—everyone has a preloaded conception of what a New Yorker may sound like, a Midwesterner, a Southerner. Accents are almost definitely the first manifestation one thinks of within a statement like that, but there are also idioms, colloquialisms, and differences in vocabulary. These unique aspects of vocalized identity are passed down via consistent communication and/or reified through geographic and cultural necessity. The accents and rhythms we are brought into often become our own, usually subconsciously, both as the way we learn language and one way that we fit into our respective cultures. In terms of cultural necessity, one may think of systems used to communicate about local transportation—the subway, for example, in major cities. Knowing the way to speak about a place, how to communicate as a member of the in-group in a way that does not stick out in terms of idiomatic understanding or accent can be vital to existing comfortably within a given culture. One may think of this relationship of culture and language as an example of anthropological theorizations of linguistic relativity (Hill & Mannheim, 1992) such as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. That is, the communicative language we learn and the way we learn it influences the ways we understand the world and cultures that we inhabit.

Southern writers, like O'Connor quoted earlier in this chapter, seem to agree that the lingual and verbal peculiarities of the South do something in terms of constructing the Southerner's worldview and particularized voice. Lee Smith (2011) acknowledges that the ways we tell stories and understand our world and ourselves is “to some degree determined by how you first hear language” [web post].

In turn, my own negotiation of identity was frequently externalized in the modulation and neutralization of my once-Southern accent. It is an accent I still have from time to time, especially when speaking with family, but my general public presentation tends to eschew the

drawl that I first came into. My attitudes toward the South have changed over time; unlike my mother and many of my interview participants, I have left the South and lived elsewhere. Within my eventual reconciliation of my queer and Southern identities and my move to the Midwest, I have found a kind of reclamation of my regional home.

Last weekend, a man who I later learned was a Virginian asked me if I could hear his Southern accent. After learning of his origins, I asked him a contentious question—if he considered Virginia the South. Often what states are considered Southern is a hot topic debate among those who take pride in their regional affiliation. Do we define via the culture? The Mason-Dixon line? Simple geography? Cultural perception? In my experience, most Alabamians would not think of Virginia as Southern—it seems too far removed from the Alabamian conception of the South. The man I was speaking to clarified that he didn't think of it as particularly Southern either. I then returned the question, "Where do I sound like I'm from?"

"Oh man I don't know. You have a pretty . . . uhm . . . neutral voice. So, I guess, the Midwest?" he asked, more a question than a declaration. Neutral, I could deal with. Neutral doesn't feel like I've done a disservice to my personal, geographic and familial history, but for some reason—some nonsensical Southern pride, maybe—being labeled Midwestern made me cringe a little bit. Being labeled with another region made it seem like all the work of neutralizing my drawl was a turning of my back, letting the stereotypes associated with the South "win." Even for all of the hardship and confusion the South seemingly crafted for me, it still resonates as an integral part of my experiences, and therefore an integral part of my identity and of me.

Southerners—especially the older, more conservative of them —have trouble reconciling the idea of someone being “a good Southerner” by their standards with the idea that the same person they hold in high regard can identify as queer. As Halberstam (1995) points out, we have a tendency to erase or ignore things that we don’t fully understand. The South and homosexuality are an enduring example of this. Due to the region’s relationship with “othered” sexual identities, two potentialities exist.

First, a person’s sexuality may be acknowledged, but it is usually seen as the defining characteristic of that person; to be defined by sexuality in a Christ-dominated landscape may lead to being judged, marginalized, or even shunned. However, the Southerner accepted for their sexuality falls in line with an orientation to the other that follows the maxim “They may be a freak, but they are our freak.” As Allison notes in his 2018a response to a performance of *Bless Our Hearts*, “Julia Sugarbaker once famously said in an episode of *Designing Women*, ‘In the South we’re proud of our crazy people ... We bring them right on down to the living room and show ‘em off.’” This orientation may be somewhat well-meaning, but the treatment of othered identity and the stigmatization of mental health is troubling, to say the least. To borrow from Conquergood (1985), this seems like an extreme cultural example of the “curator’s exhibitionism”—the pitfall of engaging with the other that relies on sensationalizing the difference. To display the other in a way that relies on the “crazy” or non-normative aspects of their identities and personalities does not offer much in the way of dialogue or understanding.

Second, and contrastingly, a queer person may be included within the Southern sociocultural landscape, but only if their sexuality is not a visible or prominent feature of their public performance of identity. To reach this social “inclusion,” one’s sexuality must only be discussed (if at all) hush-hush behind parlor doors and on private porches, allowing the public to

never have to engage with the realities of a “homosexual Southerner.” This aligns with a lot of what I experienced—the compassionate closeting by my mother and my own performance of covering my sexual identity. To align once again with Conquergood’s (1985) moral map, this may be seen as a large-scale “skeptic’s cop-out” wherein many Southern folk refuse to engage with the sexual identity of a queer-identified Southerner.

These conditions of existing as queer in the South led to my already discussed feeling that I had to embrace *either* my regionality or my sexuality. I was socialized to see them as at-odds aspects of my identity that could never really intersect in a productive, self-preservative, or healthy way. As a teen, my queer identity felt like it was growing inside me; finding outlets to express this developing aspect of my identity felt imperative for my survival. I turned to young adult literature, reading what I thought of as “gay” books while hiding in the stacks of a Barnes and Noble one town over. Feeling, then, that I had to choose one of these two parts—queer or Southern, I threw myself into my own “de-Southernization.” I was working to find “safe” ways to increase my performance of queerness—creating a Butlerian (1990) performativity of closeted queer identity that relied on repetition and reward from performing both queer and closeted at the appropriate times to the appropriate audiences. I was highlighting the scripts that were called for in any given situation in order to reap maximum cultural reward. In order to continue my desire to slowly build a personalized queer performance in a safe way, I needed to deconstruct the performative practices that marked me as Southern. My “Southernness” is inherently messy, and although in some ways I was always at odds with it (by not reading as “normal” in the space of the South), it is still a central part of my early life and my present self-identification. As such, it exists and is performed and re-performed in many planes on different sites of myself. In my quest for “De-Southernizing” though, the first and most obvious field in the battle of perceptions was

my voice.

I am walking through the mall with my boyfriend, Joe. We are in the shoe section of Belk or JC Penney; as a law student he needs new dress shoes for an internship. I feel the familiar vibration of a silenced phone against my leg. My aunt, Gladys Faye, is calling me. I answer the phone and have what felt like a pretty standard conversation—“I’m well; school is good; how’s Tennessee? The football game was fun, but I’m sunburned from sitting in the bleachers playing my saxophone,” I go through the usual answers. After I hang up, Joe looks away from the shoes, wide-eyed, at me. “What. Was. That?” he asks.

“I don’t know what you mean It was . . . my aunt?” I question, trying to understand what he is asking or implying.

“That didn’t even sound like you!” he exclaims, “What was that accent?!”

“Oh . . . , uh, . . . was I really Southern on the phone?” I ask, and then explain that it often happens when I speak with family; a thick—and I mean thick—Southern drawl comes seemingly out of nowhere. It’s a subconscious act of code-switching that happens only around my closest family members.

“It was a different person?” he continues, confused; “I mean . . . which one is your real voice?” he finishes, still perplexed.

To be honest, both are me—fully and unapologetically. One is born from my family and my geographic roots while the other is born from a practiced, repetitive daily performative choice (Butler, 1990) that makes it as much a part of me as any identity imposed by my origins. Like the South that I inhabit, I am “full of contradictions” (Johnson, 2008), and both voices serve as practices that have helped me learn and negotiate what it means to reconcile those

contradictions. My voice allows me to navigate being Southern and Queer, and sometimes and in some places allows me to perform both simultaneously upon and within the same body.

Claiming both identities as part of me is much easier to write down than it was to actualize. Reconciliation between two seemingly disparate factions is hard externally, but the complications of that are only compounded when experienced as internal conflict. Some internalized part of me saw homosexuality in the same ways that those I was raised by did: a blight, something wrong with me, something shameful. I had internalized the stigmas about queer identity that were held by most of my peers and my family. I felt this shame whenever I would feel same-sex attraction; I felt it when I would listen to the preacher of my conservative Southern church tell me that “the gays” will go to Hell; I felt this shame for years every time I kissed or touched another man. This shame is not an uncommon feeling for gay men who are subject to the sociocultural effects of the closet (Burgess, 2005; Herek, 2004). When my mother expressed that I could never teach as an out gay man, I was culturally conditioned to believe that her statement was true; sexuality would be a limiting factor my entire life.

I had no real way to mentally combat my mother’s claims, even if part of me felt the incorrectness and prejudice that was at their core. Culturally, I had few if any positive representations of queer individuals set forth in popular culture and the media. As hooks (1996) tells us, filmic (and broader cultural) representations affect the ways in which we perceive and perform identities. In the absence of positive representations, shame and stigma were used to create a crooked room worldview (Harris-Perry, 2011) wherein I felt that to be perceived positively I had to either closet my sexuality in order to perform (read: straight) Southerner or closet my regionality in order to perform successful (read: metropolitan) homosexual. In short, to

be “good” at being both Southern and queer never felt like an option.

“You don’t dress like a teacher” I state, matter-of-factly at the end of a class on memoir. I am met with a confused look from my Honors College 300 course teacher.

“Ok . . . ?” she replies, questioning what I mean or why I would say that.

“N-n-n-no no no,” I clarify, “That is definitely a good thing. I mean you are way more fashionable than what people associate with ‘teacher clothes’—you know what I mean?”

She laughs, “Uh Thanks, then, I think.” A sly smile and a quick adjustment of the collection of necklaces and lavalieres that hang over the leopard print blouse she is wearing.

Two years later, I have taken several writing classes with Bebe—the fashionable teacher. She is, in many ways, my de facto mentor during all of my undergraduate years. In my junior year, I am selected for an undergraduate reading series. Each reader is to bring someone—a friend, a professor, a colleague—to introduce them; in an easy decision, I ask her to introduce me.

“I’ve had the pleasure of teaching Colin across two years now. He adeptly moves across genres, creating a pastiche of notable Southern writers. His memoir has notes of Tennessee Williams and the writing of Truman Capote; the fiction he is reading today tells a story that could have come from the hands of Flannery O’Connor. He has the wicked wit of David Sedaris, but through all these comparisons his voice remains distinctly his own.”

I sit in the audience, taking in her flattering words and blushing a little as I shuffle my stack of papers—a last minute finalization for the order I will read them in. She knows the ways that these comparisons resonate with me, especially Truman, Tennessee, and David. Those men

are where I finally found the performance script I needed, the way that my identity could be both Southern and Queer at the same time without the tensions that I felt barred me from feeling complete before. I had looked into their books and to the front porches of their life to find a specific archetype of Southern man: well dressed, refined, an entertainer and a writer. Ready to deliver Southernisms and witty bon mots in equal measure. The type that helped me find a suitable script was all seersucker suits and dinner parties.

I acknowledge the ways in which this, too, may rely on stereotypes, but I found in that script the reconciliation I needed, a kind of starting point for my two identities to co-exist and be co-performed. It took a while, but once I found these representations in literature, I was able to reconcile the voices and the language that I first heard as something that could belong to me as well. As Kenneth Burke (1973) would say, I had found literature and, in that discovery, acquired my own “equipment for living.” Dillard (2002) outlines the affective performance of David Sedaris in a reading of his essay, “Go, Carolina”; in it, he discusses the judgments of Sedaris’s less than masculine delivery. He points out that Sedaris’s voice (which was famously subjected to speech therapy at a young age [Sedaris, 2000]) is seen as feminine, less than, “damaged” or in need of repair (p. 5). The voices of those queer Southern writers may not be perfect, and they may still carry the stigma associated with queer identities and same-sex desire, but they opened a door for me to understand myself. Some may see them as broken, feminine, or less than, but those voices—informed by the language I first heard and that they first heard; informed by their own struggles with identity, by their own becomings in a place that wasn’t always perfectly hospitable . . . those voices are the lodestars that led me to the reconciliation of *my* queer and Southern identities.

*I have broken the glass to release a
menagerie of antiquated
identities: a Jem
carved from stone, reticent
but still loving
with high pitched, honey
dipped vowels
falling
through the prison bars before
they found the page.*

*The ways in which they drawl out a distinctly Southern and
a distinctly queer
melancholy, writing
scripts that allow me to feel and perform
the parts of myself that
I have hidden. Allow me to show
myself in the oppressive,
humid
Southern Sun.*

*My identity grows slow like kudzu, a molasses
rolling
down
the hills of*

Appalachia,
an accented existence
rolling down
to meet the drawling tongues of
my family,
real and imagined.

Tennessee welcomes me to the front porch, Alabama offers
me a drink, and Mississippi is the cousin we talk about
but don't invite to the party.

Queer Southerners exist
together at midnight in the garden, lodged between feelings
of good and evil. We are, we have found,
just right.

Moving Outward

These experiences and the textual act of sense-making that stems from them are what drives me to the tensive intersection of queer and U.S. Southern identity as a productive theoretical space in which to conduct research. For years I floundered; I felt out of place; I felt othered with no performative prescriptive to alleviate my own alienation. One learns a lot about themselves and their beliefs when they must struggle against a culture to affirm that they exist, that they are here, that they matter—which seems politically prescient as I write in 2018 and 2019 . . . and sadly, perhaps even moreso than those years I look back on. The tensions between knowing your own identity within your body and a culture that seems to reply, “absolutely not” are hard, but they are epistemic; they create knowledge of ourselves and our situations. That

struggle against culture—the crying to God to fix me, the enduring harassment, the constant fear of being found out and “outed”—is difficult, but it is such a part of me and the personal history I carry—a history saturated in the humidity of Southern air.

Equally a part of my own conceptualization of the queer/Southern intersection is the eventual everyday performance scripts I found that eased my own struggle. For me, it was the queer Southern author, but that cannot be what it is for everyone. Using the same question I asked myself (“Where do I locate my reconciliation of queer and Southern as disparate aspects of my identity?”) as a springboard, I dove into a project to find answers. I wanted to know what that moment or artifact of reconciliation was for other queer Southerners—especially those who inhabit different intersections of identity than I. With that in mind, I interviewed the queer Southerners covered at length in the rest of this document to see what this struggle was like for a diverse subset of people who shared those specific identifications with me. Understanding this journey towards reconciliation for myself was an important part of beginning this project, but approaching it reflexively became instrumental into the ways that I find conversations between my experiences and the experiences of the queer Southerners that I interviewed. This reflexive account of the self, then, becomes incredibly important as I strive to realize my own conceptualizations of a queer oral history praxis; this understanding of self and lived experience allows me to find dis/connections as I interact with the texts of interviewees in a way that leads me to queer the idea of subjectivity and find dialogue between the self and the other (as discussed in Chapter One), both central tenets of practicing queer oral history.

CHAPTER 3

THE HEART OF THE MATTER: SCRIPTING AND A MODEL

I find myself sitting on one of those couches that sits too low to the ground. The room itself is dimly lit—curtains blocking out all but a few slivers of mid-day sun. One lamp in the corner, the Y-shaped kind you buy on back-to-school sale from Target or Wal-Mart, struggles against the dimness. The cord runs between my feet, under the couch, across the floor; frankly, it's more cord than I would have expected for just one lamp. I've been left alone in the front room of a house in a neighborhood in Birmingham, Alabama; it's the kind of neighborhood where the doors have grates of bars over the windowed sections. I find myself leaning into the difference, hearing my mother describe it as the "seedy part of town" (a way she had once described the home of my middle school girlfriend). "How has research brought me here?" I ask myself. I feel a kind of guilt, maybe? It is that feeling that we might have when we find our mind and body making assumptions before we realize it, assumptions that we know are wrong in some critical way. I fight through the negotiations of these warring feelings, wanting to live up to the tenets I have set for myself and to keep the door open for this to be a strong dialogic interaction.

"Just a few more minutes; I gotta look right," Shekinah, who refers to herself as "an unapologetic Black trans woman," hollers from a few rooms back. The crated dog in the next room lets out a few loud, high-pitched barks in response to Shekinah's explanation. "Hush up, Baby," she says to the dog.

I arrived about twenty minutes ago with my camcorder and audio recording equipment in tow. Shekinah had declined written communication in favor of talking on the phone as we arranged the interview, and it seems that some things were lost in translation in the process, the most important being the fact that I would video record her. Even though I explained that the

video recording was just for me—that I would review it as I made a performance from my research interviews—she insisted that, if she was going to be on video, she needed to change her hair, her dress, and put on some nails.

Once she had prepared herself—changed into a longer dress, put on a bit more makeup, and put on her hair—she returned for the interview. We chatted a bit beforehand, and she was guarded and skeptical, likely because of a life full of those assumptions that I was actively trying to resist within my own mind. “The only reason I’m doing this is because I trust Leigh,” she told me. (Leigh is a mutual acquaintance and another interviewee who put me in contact with Shekinah).

When interviewing, I place the camera at roughly a 45-degree angle, creating a right triangle between Shekinah and me. I want to catch body language and would prefer my participants talk to me instead of the camera. This had, up to this point, worked. Once the interview started, Shekinah looked to me for the questions, but as soon as she started talking, she turned away in the direction of the camera—disregarding our interaction in order to directly address the lens of the recording machine. Retrospectively, I acknowledge this as a likely part of her media experience—she has been interviewed somewhat frequently as the creator and director of the TAKE Resource Center for trans women in the Birmingham area. At the time, though, I remember feeling amused but off-put by the focus on the camera. It was as if she was speaking to an audience that was not there.

Months later I sat down in my office on the campus of Southern Illinois University with pages and pages of interview transcripts around me and video files on the laptop in front of me. I clicked play on “ShekinahPt1.mp4,” and she looked directly through my screen at me—her audience had arrived, and with it, the eye contact I had longed for during our interview event. As

*the video played, all of my experiences with and around her came rushing back—the drive to her home, knocking on the door, waiting in that dimly-lit sitting room on the too-low couch. I was also reminded of the way my orientation to the event changed once I heard her narratives—once we spoke, those assumptions that I was worried about mostly dissolved in favor of listening and witnessing the different stories Shekinah shared with me. This moment in particular reminded me of two things. First, it is an example of the power of narrative to humanize across difference. Further, it exemplifies the fact that negotiating a dialogic performance and avoiding the pitfalls that Conquergood (1985) outlines—here, especially, *The Curator’s Exhibitionism*—is a constant negotiation; dialogic performance is something to work towards, not a tacit commitment.*

Turning again to the wealth of my conversation with Shekinah, I was intimidated by the sheer amount of material I had been gifted. “Gawd,” I sighed to myself in the closed office, “How am I going to edit this down and get all of it in there?” This was a question about the amount of content, to be sure, but more than that a question about capturing the holistic experience through scripting.

I do not think that I was immediately successful at capturing Shekinah or my experience with her onto the page, but those questions still guided my process. Just as a film-maker tries to find the best cuts to edit a film into a cohesive and powerful document, I was trying to find ways to cut the interview in a way that left the truth of Shekinah intact while also presenting the most condensed kernel of what her voice brought to the diverse selection of interview participants. The guiding questions throughout revolved around how to best represent each of these participants, while leaving as much of the text as unbroken as possible. Additionally, I constantly looked to the ways to notate the physicality of an individual on the page; I did not want pages

and pages of notes on their body and movement to go into the textual script, but I needed them to be present and readable as distinct from each other.

This chapter functions as a consideration and documentation of that scripting process. As I seek to offer a model for how to practice queer oral history, it is important for me to trace the project through its various stages, and the craft of creating a script is an undeniably important aspect of the translation from interview event into performed show. Through documenting the process, I offer a model of transforming interview data into a script on the page, showing a textual translation of one practice of queer oral history. In doing this, I want to note that my process was imperfect at times—as most are; the choices I make and made are fallible. This chapter does not document *the* way of translating from interview to script, but rather *one* tracing of what that might look like for performing scholar-artists who decide to pursue a practice in line with queer oral history.

While I find this kind of meta-discussion of scripting to be important, a cursory search of *Text and Performance Quarterly* shows that essays explicitly discussing scripting practices seem under-emphasized in our field. There are many models of scripting, for example, in *Text and Performance Quarterly's* Performance Space, but a lack of essays that explicitly address the process of making a script. Additionally, one may turn to texts such as *Body, Paper, Stage* (Spry, 2011), *Writing for Performance* (Harris & Jones, 2016), or certain chapters in *Teaching Performance Studies* (Stucky & Wimmer, 2002); however, these texts offer only a few models in a field full of varying methodologies and practices that deserve to be not only modeled but also discussed as vibrant and dynamic parts of our collected performance praxes. There are discussions of translation in an abstract sense—those that look to translation as a concept within adapting a text (largely pre-existing literature or interviews), but discussions of the concrete steps

of adapting a script seem limited. My perception is that we as a field tend to think of the script as a complete representation of the process, but I would contend that a discussion of scripting practices is a necessary and sometimes under-discussed aspect of making many kinds of performance work.

This chapter seeks to offer one small piece of this part of the conversation that I see as a missing link in the ways we document how we make performances. First, I offer a discussion of my process of mobilizing the scripting of queer oral history through my work in *Bless Our Hearts*; I review the theoretical precepts that I follow in order to articulate the ways the self and the other in the scripting process for queer oral history. Then I offer a discussion of the ways I approached scripting choices during this process. To conclude, I include a copy of the script for the show in order to offer a model of what scripting a queer oral history for performance might look like.

Dialogue in One Body: Scripting Queer Oral History

If we look back to the roots of performance studies, to writing on the ways that we script literature, McHughes (1981) offers, “All transactional theories of reading, adapting, directing, and performing are based on the notion of literature as a *process*” (p. 27). I would contend, along with Pelias & Van Oosting’s (1987) call to consider different kinds of performance and performers in addition those discussed by oral interpretation, that our lived experiences and the transcripts of an oral history project should also be engaged to illuminate performance as a process. Further, Pelias and Shaffer (2007) note that “To make experience intelligible through performance is a translation” (p. 20). As a performer and oral historian, one of my goals is exactly that: to use the process of making performance from these transcripts to render the experiences of a community, in this case queer Southerners, intelligible to a wider audience.

As I approach the chain of memory and interpretation that is writing about scripting an oral history from the transcripts I collected a few years ago (at the time of writing), I find myself returning to the narrative that opens this chapter. There are so many feelings I can recall, even two years later. I felt as if I was in some universe that was part *But I'm a Cheerleader* (Babbitt, 2000), part *Sordid Lives* (Shores, 2000), and another part *Gummo* (Korine, 1997). The interview process overwhelmed my senses and my emotions at the time, and now it dominates my memories of that summer as a whole. So, as I turn to scripting and reflect on it now, I find myself returning to the question—how can we translate something so overwhelming and three-dimensional onto the page as part of the process of making performance?

As I address my own attempts to wrestle with this question, I look at my efforts relative to a few broad ideas. First, I briefly review some of the theoretical and methodological precepts that led to my understanding of queer oral history, and thus my choices during the scripting process; then, I look at some of the challenges I faced in actualizing queer oral history into a script, focusing on my desire for a dialogic feel for the performance; then I offer a brief conclusion by reflecting on the choices made in framing and concluding the script.

As noted in Chapter One, oral history and similar ethnographic methods that rely upon interaction with and observation of the other have a strong ability to engage the empathy and intercultural understanding we often see described as foundational to performance studies (Pollock, 2006; Tuder, 2006). Stucky (1995) outlines the pedagogical implications of performing oral history, pointing to the ways it facilitates what Conquergood (1985) frames as a dialogic interaction, based in empathy, between self and other. Conquergood's articulation is central to some modern understandings of performance studies, as evidenced by Pelias & Van Oosting's (1987) further engagement of Conquergood's claims. Conquergood notes, though, that the

performance studies practitioner may be more concerned with “acquiring experiential insight rather than maintaining aesthetic distance” (2). Privileging insight into the lived realities of the subject rather than that aesthetic distance puts the emphasis on the potential for knowledge, empathy, and understanding offered through ethically performing the other. While some performative methods may privilege aesthetic quality or established conventions, oral history forefronts dialogic potential and the ways it can enhance understanding and knowledge of the other. This notion of foregrounding experiential insight guided my approach to both scripting and performing a queer oral history.

Stucky (2002) calls for presenting everyday aspects of performance through Hopper’s (1993) “everyday life performance” (or ELP) while noting the striking similarity of the ELP process to the act of preparing an oral history transcript. Stucky (1993) outlines the steps of ELP preparation as “recording, transcribing, analyzing, rehearsing, and performing” (178). Even if one is to curate an oral history for the page, the researcher will likely undertake the first half of Stucky’s instructions for ELP performance; an oral historian will almost certainly record, transcribe, and analyze as they make choices about what to include within the oral history text. Those who may perform oral history will undergo the rest of Stucky’s ELP outline, adding rehearsal and performance to their methodological process, making clear the similarity in the ways that we may use these methods to create and embody performance texts. Through their similarity, the praxis of oral history and ELP mutually inform one another and can be practiced concurrently. In fact, the work of recording and transcribing an oral history can readily create a partial script for the ELP performer, as Stucky (1993) further calls for the performer to consider transcripts and recordings as “two versions of the same script” (178). With Conquergood’s notion of dialogic performance and experiential insight alongside a praxis that acknowledged the

utility of ELP for oral history, I started to look at how to return to one of the central questions of queer oral history: how do I embrace myself as both subject and researcher?

The Self and the Other

As I began scripting scenes for *Bless Our Hearts*, I worked at the intersections of oral history, ELP, and autoethnographic performance traditions. This approach allowed me to attend to Conquergood's (1985) claims that obtaining "experiential insight" may be obscured by a more strict and traditionalist approach, such as that of ELP, but may offer a more fully realized understanding of the other than a strictly interpretive oral history practice would. While the strict attention to things like misspeaking and verbal filler associated with ELP and other verbatim forms of theatre and performance offers its own embodied knowledge of the subject, that practice may inhibit the emotional and interpretive connection other narrative performance methods such as oral history fosters.

I wanted to maintain my commitment to Conquergood's (1985) notion of dialogic performance and his call that those performing across difference should seek experiential insight. At the same time, I desired to make an engaging solo performance that would not limit me to sitting for the duration of the narrative—as most of my participants sat and responded to interview questions. Building from my understanding of Conquergood's words, I contend that there are times in crafting performance where strict methodologies—like ELP—hinder our ability to create deep connections with the (re)performed interviewees, and further make it difficult to engage an audience in the content of the interviewees' respective narratives. The model that I propose through this discussion and the correlative show operates under the argument that by combining methodologies, a practitioner may be required to loosen the expectations of one in order to accommodate the other. Through this methodological "impurity"

then, one may create a performance that allows the performer (and through an increased chance of engagement, their audience) a greater likelihood of reaching a deeply dialogic performance that in turn grants the performer (and to an extent the audience) greater experiential insight into the experiences of those that are being reperformed.

To extend this emotional and interpretive connection between self/researcher and subject, I employ the use of autoethnography, placing myself alongside the other as part of my subject pool. Boylorn (2011) offers a compelling articulation of placing the self alongside other in her book *Sweetwater*. Compiled through interviews and participant observation, Boylorn's writing places her own story firmly within the generations of region-specific stories she offers her readers. The narrative of *Sweetwater* is made stronger by Boylorn's reflexive attendance to the self as contextualization of story *and* contextualized by story. Berry (2016) also textually models the ways in which the researcher can place themselves alongside the subject. His inclusion of his own lived experience in his ethnographic work about bullying in schools (*Bullied*) illuminates the ways reflexively placing ourselves within our research can offer context, nuance, and analysis by finding our relationships to the subject matter.

While neither Boylorn nor Berry's work has been adapted for the stage, I follow the example of oral historians *and* performance practitioners such as E. Patrick Johnson, who adapted his oral history *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (2008) into a solo show (2012), weaving his own experiences and analysis throughout his presentation of the oral history's participants. Using Johnson's introductory delineation of his method as an example to work from and expand, I collected eleven interviews from individuals who identify as both queer and Southern. Then, I had the interviews transcribed before reviewing them in-depth in order to code them for words and phrases that stood out to me. Themes that emerged during my interview

process had already been guiding my thinking about turning these transcripts into a show, so I paid special attention for those things that led my thinking of the show as I reflected on the interviews in the months before beginning to form the script.

For example, one of the most prominent themes throughout the interviews was community and tension. Tensions with the South and the queer community are both things that I have experienced throughout my life, so those stories seemed like places of strong dialogue; many of those stories—both mine and the interviewees’—occupied my mind whenever I thought of this project. My coding process allowed me to catalogue stories that immediately stood out in my memory of the interview process (such as Shekinah’s attending a “men having sex with men” support group) as well as rediscover those that were not as immediate in my memory (like Leigh’s narrative of the Pride parade).

In these cases, those codes relied on mentions of ideas related to community or tensions therewith. After this coding, I went through the 186 pages of interview transcripts and began selecting sections to integrate into the script for the first scene that I compiled, “Grit and Resilience.” I made selections and cuts based on a number of factors: revelatory moments or phrases, length, the diversity of identities and expression, special insights, and thematic flow. In between many of these narratives, I wrote a mixture of framing and personal narrative, pulled from my own lived experience. In order to craft these moments within the script from my own experiences, I engaged a mixture of practical function and aesthetic need. As an experimental model, I do not feel that I can guarantee that I followed quantifiable steps at every juncture, because as most performance practitioners know, creating aesthetic performance can be a slippery and amorphous thing; however, if I was to retroactively follow in Stucky’s earlier referenced steps and enumerate this particular part of the practice, there are some key things that

I would encourage myself and anyone looking to practice queer oral history to engage in as they move from the interview event to a script that includes both the self and the other. First the researcher should record their own account of the interview experience, paying special attention to writing or recording notes about the moments in their own lives that they were reminded of as they listened to and made sense of their interviewees' responses. Then using those notes, the practitioner should craft the relevant narratives into short vignettes; at this point it would be useful to arrange them either alongside the transcripts where these memories might have occurred, or—closer to my own practice—arrange them via the same codes that are applied to the interview transcripts. Once the vignettes are either paired or coded, the researcher should view them in the context of the in-process script, asking things like, “What is needed here?” “Does this narrative tonally fit?” and “Does this narrative show a cultural relation between my experience(s) and those of the interviewee?” Next, and before the final writing moves into the script, one should take account of the practical needs—the transition moments, the oncoming introductions of new speakers, and general flow of the aesthetic text and (at this point imagined) staged show; once the researcher has gauged the practical realities of the text as well as the theoretical conversations it prompts, they should revise the narratives with appropriate expansion, subtraction, or addition in a way that allows them to be successfully laid side-by-side with the narratives chosen through the coding process.

Through this careful, practical, and reflexive inclusion of one's own narratives alongside those of the interviewees, the researcher can create a text that increases the potential for dialogue between the self and the other—not only in a way that offers the performer experiential insight, but in a way that is accessible and legible to audience members engaging these texts for the first time. The inclusion of autoethnographic reflexivity pushes the scripting further towards

Conquergood's articulation of dialogic performance by clearly attending to both parties of the dialogic relationship—the self and the other. Through incorporating my own experiences and narratives, I become part of the subject pool that the audience witnesses. Like I did with my interviewees, I asked myself questions, collected my own narratives, cut and selected aspects thereof, and then re-performed them. This reflexive self-inclusion, then, becomes integral in the move from oral history toward queer oral history and functions as an extension of what Boyd (2008) traces as a growing aspect of the oral history methodology. “Historians can somehow come to know these ‘selves’ through their self-descriptions” (179) and that self-knowing is imperative to negotiating the “discursive clash” (179) of queer theory and oral history. In my practice, the key to this negotiation comes from the merging of different methodologies into the template offered by oral history in order to negotiate the different facets of dialog a performance may foster. By attending to myself as a subject through autoethnography, I strengthen the dialogic relationship between researcher and subject; by making interpretive choices informed (yet not limited) by ELP, I am able to offer the audience an accessible representation of my interviewees and myself, nuanced by the embodied reality of each individual whom I re-perform.

In turn, I find that centralizing attention to the self as well as the other within a queer oral history praxis works to foster reflexive analysis of both the topics that have emerged from the interviews and my relationship to those topics. The performative reconstruction of my own identity alongside the performative construction of other identities offers new ways of knowing, listening, and understanding across difference. The dialog of (re)performance becomes energized through re-living the simultaneity of similarity and difference. By leaning into those similarities while welcoming the differences, I engage what Goltz & Zingsheim (2015) refer to as “queer listening,” asking what we can gain towards building coalitions and empathy through the act of

reaching toward understanding of the other. Alongside the act of queer listening, I find Chávez's (2013) articulation of "differential visions" (45-47) in this simultaneity. To seek differential visions as an aspect of the dialogic relationship is to reflexively look towards the self in search of tensions with our own identities and experiences and to seek to change or make sense of them through coalitional engagement of the other.

As I structure the script and reperform the multiple identities of my interviewees, I find myself reflecting on these two notions through my own body. I find them especially resonant when I approach those with identities more divergent from my own (as opposed to those with whom I found more similarity). While I share certain aspects of Southerness and queerness with everyone that I interviewed, I find myself listening (through the interview and through re-embodiment) to folks like Shekinah, Joan (the septuagenarian gay woman), and Jamie (the lesbian pastor) in ways that acknowledge my differences in identity, age, and faith and asks "What might I learn from them? What might my experience with them show me about a queer South that is not my own?" Alongside this queer act of listening, I find myself reflecting on my own identities through my interactions with the other, interrogating my own positionalities in relationship to their narratives. Am I or was I the type of gay man that Shekinah had tensions with when she attended the men-having-sex-with-men support group? Am I the type of younger queer who is ignoring the voices of an older generation, e.g., Joan? If I am, or was, or have the potential to be, how can I look to my own identity and make sure that I do not consistently act in ways that enable those negative possibilities to become or remain realities? This reflexivity—a part of queer listening—goes further to engage that notion of differential visions; both ideas are useful as we seek to use self-awareness and reflexivity as a mode to reach a coalitional politic of engaging the other through our research, but also in the political space of daily life. My hope is

that the attached script (along with this discussion) models this reflexivity for those who practice oral history or similar ethnographic performance methods. The script should offer one tactic to reach towards coalition as an example of the means we may utilize to enhance the dialogic potentiality when engaging difference in performance scholarship.

Making Choices

While conceiving of *Bless Our Hearts*, I wanted to keep in mind these concepts—especially furthering Conquergood’s call for dialogic performance and Boyd’s look at the relationship between queer theory and oral history. Ultimately, I found that the marriage of multiple methodologies led to a more dialogic place that reconciled the self and other in ways that attended to differences while also leaning into Boyd’s questions of the self’s/other’s subjectivity. In modeling a way for performance scripts to acknowledge these concepts, I have made several textual scripting choices that stem from a mixture of the theoretical and methodological precepts discussed above. Loosely, these decisions exist on a few planes: the selection of material, the denotation of embodied presence(s), and the aesthetic autoethnographic choices.

As mentioned above, I made selections from the interviews for the script based on a number of factors: revelatory moments or phrases, length, the diversity of identities and expression, special insights, and thematic flow. To select my own sections (discussed more in depth later), I outlined or drafted short forms of my narratives and then chose which would allow me the most thematic dialogue with the interviewee. I also made choices about narratives in order to facilitate transitions or offer information that I felt the audience needed. A narrative like the first “Colin” monologue near the beginning of the scene “Grit and Resilience” (pp. 99-100) fills both roles—it ties Calvin’s mention of “family” to my own family, opening me up to offer

complementary narratives. I chose a family narrative that illustrates my own tensions with the gendered expectations mentioned by Calvin. This short story—about the ways that I would be policed as a child when I would play with “girl toys” (such as Barbies or *The Little Mermaid*)—helps to offer more context for Calvin’s expression that “the South’s not always real good about that” (p. 99). I also chose this brief illustration of my own experience because of the various ways that it connects with Calvin’s segment within the show. The narrative is primarily located within my childhood; one of my frequent thoughts during these interviews—especially with those like Leigh and Calvin who work with queer youth—is how different the expectations are for some queer children today—the spaces that would have seemed so foreign to me when I was a struggling queer teen. Calvin praises the family-orientation of Southern culture, and while I think there are positive aspects to it, I wanted to offer a counter-narrative; often the aesthetics of a traditional family have been weaponized as anti-queer. A strong dialogue acknowledges both similarity and difference, and in this moment, I chose and structured my narrative to connect with Calvin’s but to also offer a broader painting of familial machinations within our shared culture.

Establishing Calvin at the beginning of the scene and arranging our two voices to speak to both positives and negatives about the South in regards to family and community allowed me to illuminate some themes that run through the interviews—a recurring thread of loving the South, but criticizing and naming the region-specific hardships. Acts of selection like placing Calvin’s narratives alongside my own about family and queer identity obviously work to create thematic links, but also function as trails of breadcrumbs for the audience. Here, I think of Grace’s interview as the first one in the show. Like Calvin (who is at the beginning of a scene), Grace introduces themes that will guide the audience through the next few interviews—she

speaks of the difference in the South and the Midwest as well as the realization of a homespace. These notions of space, place, and home are predominant throughout the interviews but are really foregrounded in the interviews following Grace.

Grace, as the first interview, also offers a roadmap for the audience to understand how and where to locate the different voices within the script; moving from a prologue voiced primarily by me/Colin, I introduce Grace and then move into her transcript and affect. Grace closes her narrative by noting that she has realized that she already has a queer home in the South. Similar to my approach with Calvin, I pull on some of the thematic strings she offers—home, space, and belonging—in order to craft my own narrative. After Grace, I have included a longer piece than most in the script, but that is in part because it is an experience that Grace and I share. The narrative is about a time when Grace and I were in high school and visiting friends-of-a-friend, Tiffany and Bethany, in the trailer they shared with their obese dachshund, Bama. The narrative is in the script located in this chapter if any of that has piqued your curiosity, but ultimately the narrative illustrates a time that I definitively felt that I did not belong in a place that felt fundamentally queer *and* Southern. Similar to the narrative following Calvin, the thematic relationship is there, but my own narrative nuances the portrait of a queer South that these disparate voices are painting through their dialogue. This practice of nuancing through related but perhaps contrasting stories is integral to my commitments to dialogic performance. Conquergood (1985) notes that dialogic performance happens when we bring “self and other together, so that they can question, debate, and challenge one another” (p. 9). Through positing myself as the contrasting narrator, alongside the voices of my interviewees, I am able to use my own position as the writer/compiler/performer of the show in order to offer the audience a dialogic view structured from placing many voices in conversation with each other.

Beyond these narratives, one of the biggest questions I had when I began scripting was how to represent the body—both my own and my interviewees’—on the page. Often, written oral history will only include the text of what was spoken; contrastingly, some ELP practitioners rely on heavy notation of the spoken text in order to capture movement, stutters, fillers, etc. In order to find the middle ground required by my goals and methodology, I tried to honor the poetry of the spoken text while still offering ample notation so that a reader (as opposed to an audience member) could achieve some sense of physical understanding of the subject and their embodied (re)actions. Looking to Anna Deavere Smith’s (1994) script for *Twilight Los Angeles, 1992*, notation of the performer’s and participants’ bodies is absent from sections of the text meant for performance. Smith presents these sections poetically without the interruption of description or direction for embodiment. She uses line breaks to denote breath, and while the poetic use of applying line breaks in this way appealed to me, for this project, it could prove to create an untenably long script. Through punctuating both my interviews and autoethnographic narratives like poetry, my script would have at least quadrupled in size. Logistically, that could produce several unwanted results—primarily, juggling so many pages while working to memorize and block a show sounds like a nightmare. Beyond that, though, it would risk making my script unpublishably long. In place of Deavere Smith’s consistent breath-based line breaks, I made the choice to try and honor the rhythm of the transcript—often leaving blocks of text without intricate stage directions. By maintaining larger breaks in speech pattern or thought—denoted by spaces between sections of text within the script, I maintain the rhythmic and poetic integrity of the interview while offering my reader and myself an accessible textual template. See, for example, during Grace’s section when she moves from saying of her relationship to the South, “I like it. It’s just, it’s comforting.” During our interview there is a pause here while she

considers

her next thought—the space denotes that space before she continues, “I grew up,” to talk about the ways her orientation to her own Southernness has changed over time.

Anna Deavere Smith does include the body in her text, however, and I chose to utilize the model she offers; instead of heavily notating the performed text, Smith offers a large stage direction that tells a reader about the person to be performed. She includes the setting in which the interview was performed as well as how the participants move. She notes their demeanor, and what is going on around them. I chose to approach denoting the participants’ bodies similarly in these sections—using this long-form stage direction to describe a “movement vocabulary” for each individual. I included things like repetitive ticks and what I think of as the participants’ “home base” posture from which all of their movements and gesture come. These stage direction passages reflect things that may not be in the selected section of interview text, but the inclusion of these descriptions before the text offers a rounder picture of the person than if these descriptions were absent. In some cases, these descriptive preludes to the actual transcript allowed me to offer the interviewees some agency in self-naming or describing. Take, for example, my description of Shekinah:

To denote the direct address to the camera employed by Shekinah, she is more performative and presentational than the other characters. She sits, shakes her hands, and moves the box forward—she wants to connect with her audience. Her voice is deep but feminine and she gestures with her hands just outside her breasts in order to frame her face as she delivers her message. Often, her hands will gesture out, but return to their palm-up positioning as she weighs her thoughts and experiences with her voice and body. She adjusts her hair and her

dress before she begins (pp. 102-103).

The choices I made in the information I shared work to establish a demeanor for Shekinah—physically, she was milder than I remembered: knees bent in, leaned forward, hands usually clasped. However, the things that stick out in my mind are moments like her self-identification as an “unapologetic Black trans woman” and the fact that she spoke directly to the camera throughout our interview. Those details, while not necessarily entirely physical in nature, are important for both a performer and a reader to consider when reading or staging Shekinah. They offer insight into her energy, and the energy of the interview itself; without those kinds of “experiential insight” (Conquergood, 1985), the possibilities of a deeper dialogue would be blunted by lack of information and understanding. Furthermore, the agency Shekinah exercises in describing herself as an “unapologetic Black trans woman” offers space for me to engage queer listening and differential visions—highlighting the differences in our experiences, while working towards building a coalitional attitude.

As shown in her section of the script, Shekinah has had tensions with the predominantly white and gay community, and I try to denote these moments textually and physically through stage direction that describe her performative displeasure with these tensions (“voice affect” and “side-eye,” p. 106). These specific directions are observable within the interview recordings—Shekinah uses a particular mocking affect, and later uses a sideways glance, colloquially referred to as “side-eye” to show her displeasure and/or skepticism with the interaction that is the object of the interview—an interaction that is indicative of her tensions with/in the queer community that was available to her. These directions offer me a way as the performer to put *her* displeasure into *my* body. They offer a reminder that helps me, the performer, to translate important aspects of the interview event onto the stage through my body. This reminder ideally allows me to

experience and illustrate a version of Shekinah's embodied tensions despite my own positionalities (white, queer, cis-male) and reach a deeper dialogic understanding. Including selective moments like this in the text, then, offers a reader an entrance into those embodied tensions.

Boyd (2008) asks us to consider who is the subject and points to the ways that oral historians often make sense of themselves through the practice of listening to the other; hearkening to her titular question, "Who is the subject?" I push this further. All of my participants were chosen across a diverse subset (in terms of age, gender, sexuality, class, etc.) but met two criteria—they self-identify as both queer and Southern. I, too, identify as both queer and Southern, and therefore meet my own terms for a subject. While my subjectivity in this project is inherently different—namely I have the agency of framing and performing as myself—I function as a subject within the project, taking a place alongside the other interviewees. To push myself in relation to Boyd's question, I looked to similar discussions in autoethnography and chose to include what Ellis (2003) refers to as an "Ethnographic I." Ellis invites (through advice to a fictionalized graduate class) those engaging in ethnographic research to consider the place of the self—to engage in introspection as a methodological and writing practice that analyzes how we both create and interact with/in scholarly work. Tony Adams and Stacy Holman Jones (2008, 2011) extend the place of introspection through a discussion of the self in autoethnography. They assert that an "autoethnographic I" can be used to "queer" our practices and conceptions of autoethnography; that is, the act of reflexive introspection is a site where autoethnography and queer theory meet. By troubling the idea of subjectivity through autoethnographic praxes, they contend that both autoethnography and queer theory are frames that are focused on destabilizing established expectations of scholarship. For me, the site where

this reflexive introspection (embodied within the script through autoethnography) meets established oral history practice is the site where I am able to begin to address Boyd's questions about subjectivity and queer oral history, in part, through asserting myself as a member of my subject pool alongside all of my interviewees.

In short, I utilized my autoethnographic writing to posit myself as/alongside my participants and queer the notion of subject within oral history practice. While constructing these sections of lived experience and reflection, I tried to attend—to queerly listen—to the others whom I had interviewed. Where did their words resonate with my experience? How was my difference simultaneously similar and different? What kinds of stories would we tell if we were swapping these narratives in person? As illustrated by my discussion of the movement between Colin's and Calvin's lines earlier, I looked to important phrases that illuminated themes across disparate interviews (such as "making space," "family," or "community"). I used these words and phrases as the springboards for my own narrative—a kind of mimesis of most conversational practice and reciprocal self-disclosure: "this person said this thing, which reminds me of this related thing!" Sometimes these reflexive autoethnographic sections are shorter and more logistically focused, facilitating movement and shifts in stage and persona. By design, I chose these sections to offer space to shift the stage. First, blending these autoethnographic moments with logistical concerns of staging allows a fuller attention to each individual interviewee, offering time to listen and internally engage both the body and text of each interview. This blended space within the text also allows me to play with staging in ways that clearly introduce each new interviewee to an audience while possibly offering to the audience parallels between myself and the interviewees that emerged within the coding and writing process. Ideally, my own reflexive attention to both the others and to myself invites the audience to engage the same kind

of thinking—to reach a mental space where ideological shifts such as acceptance, understanding, and/or a more nuanced way of considering the other—are reached through the embodiment of a dialogic performance that extends to the audience’s engagement with the performer and the narratives of the interviewees.

I choose to end the show as myself, with five poetic vignettes of place and two lines paraphrased from included interviews. The scene focuses on community and family, and the narratives I selected from each interview were evocative, critical, and beautiful in their own ways and in their own character. The last narrative from Nick (pp. 111-113) discusses his upbringing in a small Southern town, his tensions with the community feeling like a “meat market,” and the ways that facing the hardships associated with small-town queer life creates community. His words ring incredibly true to my own experience as a small-town queer teen in the South. It made me think of where I came from and where I am. It made me think of where *we* came from and where *we* are, of all the changing communities and families the interviewees and I inhabit and move between. For nearly every interview, I went into a stranger’s house. Despite entering as a stranger, I left with a bond. They knew about my work, and I knew about theirs. They shared tales of their families, born and chosen; their coming-outs; their hardships; and their happiness. I include those vignettes as a testament to the communities that identity and space can build, to the times I have felt that community myself across all of the places I have lived. Nick describes this feeling, “that it was, like, all of us against the world” (p. 113). This feeling is no stranger to marginalized folks—especially those who live in environments that are hostile to them. It’s that feeling, though, that gets him to the final line of his narrative: “This is, these are my people. Right? We- we’re in this together” (p. 113). I choose to end on those two lines because they illustrate the coalitional power of this dialogic approach; these are my people. Maybe we were

strangers when I walked through the door, but even canvassing for interviewees was a community-based process. Calvin opens the scene by saying, “Um, it, it's so family oriented, and community oriented. Um, there's a [*leans in*] resilience to Southern people that I think have served Southern LGBTQ peoples especially well” (p. 99), and I would say that community and that resilience go hand-in-hand, born of our ability to listen and dialogue between the self and the other.

The Model: The Script for *Bless Our Hearts*

Bless Our Hearts is the show that I discuss throughout this chapter as well as this dissertation. I have had the privilege of working with the script several times; I have chosen to include the script as part of the central chapter of this dissertation because in so many ways it is the heart of this process. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the script is compiled of selections of interview transcripts with the diverse queer Southerners identified within the text; these interviews are laid side-by-side with my own narratives of my queer Southern experiences.

The show itself opened with a partial showing at the Petit Jean Performance Festival in October of 2017 before completing a three-night run in the Marion Kleinau Theatre at Southern Illinois University later that month. It was subsequently presented in part at the Southern States Communication Association's convention in Nashville, TN in April of 2018, and performed in full at the International Congress for Qualitative Inquiry in May of 2018 and the National Communication Association's conference in Salt Lake City, Utah in November of 2018.

My hope is that this script—along with the conversation offered earlier in this chapter—can offer a model of what queer oral history can be, and that it leads other practitioners to a practice that results in the same empathy and camaraderie that I have felt throughout this process. Revisiting this script—these characters, narratives, and people—many times over the course of

the past few year—has offered me deep experiences with the text and body, supplying me an endless font of empathy and camaraderie. After all, as it is said in the script below, these are my people.

The Script of *Bless Our Hearts: An Oral History of the Queer South*

Please note that although the script delineates multiple characters, all characters are presented by one solo performer—here, “Colin.”

Pre-Show Projection Cue: Title Slide

Pre-Show Music Cue: “Travelin’ Through” by Dolly Parton

The stage is set with one black block, stool, or chair center and just the tiniest bit askew

Prologue: Beginnings.

Colin enters, carrying either a grocery sack or a shoddy box full of tech equipment. As he speaks, he begins setting up a tripod, a camera, a sound recorder, etc. These first lines are delivered to the empty chair, using on-stage focus, as he sets up the “interview”

Colin: All right, so I’ll give you my usual spiel. First, I will tell you a little bit about me, then my program, and finally just a little bit about this interview.

As you know, my name is Colin. I was born and raised in Alabama. I went to the University of Alabama for two degrees—Roll Tide, unless that offends you, in which case ignore the football. Uhm . . . I . . . uh identify as queer, and that’s kind of what I study . . . obviously, since we’re here, right?

I am working on my PhD up in Illinois, in performance studies—we don’t have many programs for that here, so that’s part of why I’m there, but it’s housed in

communication studies, which more people know. Performance studies is a sub-discipline that uses performance in three primary ways. First, we like to use performance to represent the research we do, so, while my mom wouldn't really read an academic article, she can probably watch a show, you know? Second, we use performance to theorize—a lot of people's entry to this is kind of gender performativity, we uh . . . perform our identities and ourselves in our daily lives. And third, we look to performance as a thing to critique or to write about.

But! This project lives primarily with those first two. So we'll be talking a bit about how you understand and perform your queer and Southern identities, and then after that I'll be making two documents from this. The first is a paper document—a dissertation—that's an oral history, the uh...collection of all of these interviews, and the other is a show. I'll be compiling these and re-performing them for audiences. The goal is that I better understand the Queer South, but also that my audience understands it more than they did before.

Aaaaand . . . this is on. And this is on. So, if you're good, we'll begin!

Colin breaks the plane of his onstage focus and speaks presentationally to the audience.

So, that is how this project started for all of my interviewees, but before that, it started for me. Perhaps, it started in my advisor's office

(Colin retrieves a toy chicken from the box and begins turning it in his hands)

I spend a lot of time in my advisor's office. Craig, some of you may know him. I am nestled amidst papers, and books, and chickens that he has accrued across his

years of teaching. Often, I storm into the room like some kind of advisee hurricane blathering about this goal and that Southern thing, and queer theory, and oral history and god knows what else. Craig is a good, gentle person and I am too type A for my own good, so, about five minutes in, I see him shake his head, wave his hands, and exhale.

Craig: *(To an audience member)* How are you doing?

Colin: And as I think of that question, I realize this show, this project—that pushes me into all of those goals and Southern things and queer theory and oral history—this project starts with how I am doing.

Craig: Would you like a seltzer? *(Pulling a La Croix from the box, offering it to the same audience member)* I have . . . lime or strawberry-pineapple.

Colin: And as I inhale the fizz of the La Croix and sit in the stillness of Craig's patience and encouragement, I think of the why question. Why this? Why narrative? Why?

Projection Cue: A sequence of slides depicting images of the South—rural landscapes, quaint town squares, a display of church hats, an elaborate tea-setting, etc.

Colin: My own narrative always seemed out of place, growing up. I spent 26 years in the South. As a queer Southerner, I always felt that I couldn't be enough of both, that I'd have to choose. Sometimes, we find the greatest clarity through listening, so that's why. That's why I struck out periodically across the past year—to neighborhoods in Tuscaloosa, Athens, Huntsville, Birmingham, and Nashville.

I listened to people I knew, and more that I didn't know. They opened their homes, their front porches, and their lives to me. They offered me drinks and gifts

and desserts, and that great Southern tradition of stories.

I have a long history with story, as most Southerners do...and in fact, most queer folk do. Stories get handed down in our families—biological and chosen.

Colin crosses the stage as if touring through these locations of memory

The story about the time my grandmother, Hilda, and her twin sister, Wilda, stole a school bus to take their dates to the movies.

The story about my father, who grew up with a leg condition, beating a kid with his crutches—all over a Mr. Goodbar.

The story of Marsha P. Johnson throwing those important bricks at Stonewall.

The story of Cleve Jones imagining and then realizing the AIDS quilt.

The stories of my drunk friends doing god-knows-what-at-the-gay-bar-bless-their-hearts.

Growing up stories. Coming out stories. All kinds of stories.

So, as I toured parts of the South, I was gifted stories from a diverse group of queer Southerners. They are white people and people of color; they are gay, lesbian, queer, trans, bisexual, and asexual. They are 22, 31, 55, 76, and many ages in between. They are unique, and dynamic, and smart, and funny, and

touching. Each of them trusted me with their stories.

Now, through their stories, I hope to better understand my own. I hope to see the ways that being a queer Southerner can somehow simultaneously feel like belonging nowhere and having family everywhere you go. I want to know if people have felt the same tensions that I have, across gender, race, identification, and age. And I hope that this reperformance offers you some sense of belonging too, because I have learned that if you give these people your time, they will give you stories and a sense of family wherever you go.

End Sequence of Projected Images

Scene 1: Southland and Religion.

Colin: Grace and I went to preschool together. We went to middle school together. We went to high school together, and we regularly see each other still. We've known each other for 23 years, and she is one of my best friends. Earlier, I talked about how this project started, and as much as it started with me, it started with her. Literally she was my first interview.

I chose to interview her first because we share so many experiences. I know that we have experienced some of those same tensions of feeling unrepresented, of not seeing the possibilities that were there for a queer person, of feeling like there was no way for us to belong in a South that we both now love.

Grace sits with an ankle crossing her knee and a slouch creeping onto her back. She talks with her hands, plays with her jewelry ... her hair ... a pillow. Her voice has a certain energetic

lilt to it but often tapers into vocal fry at the end of her statements—a tone that seems to question whatever she just shared.

Grace: Yes. Yeah, okay. So, I visited the Midwest a little bit, and I think the difference between, like, the South and the Midwest is, like, when you're walking in the grocery store, Southern people will, like, smile at you and say 'hi' and then as soon as you walk away, talk shit. And in the Midwest, they will just stare at you like you're trash immediately, and I can't decide which one I like better. I mean, do they not?

Do they do that to you? Like, you walk in and you're like, 'Hi.' You're obviously really, like, disrespected by me being here. No? Okay.

Um, the South... it's just . . . It's my home. It's where I'm from. And I wanted to leave but I don't anymore. I like it. It's just, it's comforting.

I grew up. I think everybody, like, every gay or queer kid in the South, they go through this stage where they're, like, starting to realize they're queer and they're like, 'Oh, no. I could never find a home here, ever. Like, I have to leave.' And as you get older you realize, no, I have a queer home here. Right? I don't know.

I felt like I didn't belong because my only role models were Tiffany and Bethany and Matt and Brooke. And I didn't want that. Like, I didn't want to be giving alcohol to fifteen-year-olds, when I was 22.

Okay, Tiffany, Bethany, Matt, and Brooke are . . . Oh God, how old are they now? They're in their 30s probably, right? Older than I am.

Okay, so, it's this little group, and they graduated Athens High School when my first sig- boo thing, I dunno what you would call Micah, was a freshman. So they were close, and that's how I kind of got in on that circle. But they were like, grown adults who hung out with high schoolers still just 'cause they were gay. And they were, like, trying to be nice. They were very much what you would expect grown adults who hang out with high schoolers to be. They were, like, not very classy. They were, they had a lot of animals. (laughs) As my cat walks around on the screen.

They had a lot of cheap liquor and . . . I don't know. That was . . . Bless their hearts. They were just, they weren't who I wanted to be when I grew up.

Colin: Tiffany and Bethany and Matt were exactly what I saw as possibilities when I was a queer teen in Athens. And maybe they are all perfectly happy, but it wasn't the life that I saw for myself.

During this, Colin recreates the scene—miming a dog biscuit, lounging on the “couch” etc.

I remember this one time, me and my friends—Grace included—were over at Tiffany's trailer. Tiffany was, as usual, loafed onto the couch like some ungainly upside-down cat, and Bethany was putting on a Carhartt jacket to go pick up some food from the “China Dragon.” Tiffany was apparently famished, and whined out to Bethany, “Bethy, I'm HUUUUNGRY.”

Bethany, used to this mewling, replied, “I’m gettin’ the food Tiffy” before leaving the room. While Bethany was in the split-level kitchen collecting her wallet and keys, I saw Tiffany pick up a decorative tin that sat beside her. I watched her nose wrinkle like the same ungainly cat looking for a quick snack. Just as she was about to reach in, Bethany returned.

“Tiffy. No. Those is for the dawg. Those is Bama’s cookies!” Once the door closed behind Bethany, en route now to China Dragon, the room was tense. We were all sitting there trying not to stare but wondering if she would do it. Would she eat one of Bama’s cookies? Eventually, she squeezed her hand into the tin, and as she put the dry biscuit to her lips the door opened. Bethany had forgotten something. “Tiffy! Those is Bama’s,” she said. Tiffany had been caught, not only hand in the cookie jar, but lips on Bama’s cookie. “They smell just like reg’lar cookies!”

I knew that I didn’t belong in that trailer, or with Tiffany and Bethany. While my perception was dominated by who I was around, many people found that religion dominated their ability to live in the South.

I interviewed Jamie on her front porch, just before a rainstorm. She was fresh from yard work, in a black cassock-like shirt, her white collar, and cargo shorts. As Jamie will later point out—one of the most notable things about her is not that she is a lesbian, but that she is an out pastor in the middle of the Bible Belt.

Jamie has a certain calm intensity—she is settled in herself and who she is. She leans

back into her stories, arms alternatively behind her head or presenting her listener with gestures that suggest the tangible elements of an argument she may be making. Her voice is deep and calm—that of a spiritual leader, but it has the tiniest hint of her tongue crushing her s into something more shushing than sibilant.

Jamie: Hmm. It's interesting 'cause in some ways I feel like it's all the time. I mean it's like, you know, I get up, I kind of have a uniform though. This is part of why I put this collar back on for the interview. This is kind of what I wear. I mean, I wear this to, I wear this everywhere. We wear th-, you know, during Pride Week salsa dancing, I was wearing this. You know, during, eh, you know, to clean up garbage outside the church, it's . . . So anyway, they're in the aspects to that. So in some ways, my queer identity is like the clothes that I put on in the morning, except that I've slept in them too, so that's kind of a weird metaphor. But you know, that's, it's, it's just part of what I carry through the world.

At the same time, as, as an out lesbian pastor in Birmingham, Alabama, who pastors a congregation that isn't, that has LGBTQ, has queer folks in it-

But is not solely that. I mean I say to people, "We are Black, and White, and gay, and straight, and young, and old, and cis and transgender, and, you know, rich and poor, and a little bit of everybody, which is what I think the realm of God looks like." But, um, to be able to hold that presence, that is that there is um, I don't doubt for a minute that I'm where I'm supposed to be.

Um, and it, but it's a very complicated space, and I don't talk about this very often,

so I will . . . You know, it's, it's interesting because I, you know, and it, I had a, there was a, I was in a newspaper interview. Kind of one of the standard ones that they do for new clergy, right? And, and um, and then they ran it with the headline of um, of le-, you know, [*presenting the words into the air*] *Lesbian Pastor Preaches Inclusion in Alabama*, which drew, actually I had protestors outside the church. You know? Like the week after that, so. Yeah, so you know, there was this um, but you know, I said in that interview it's like, you know, that's part of who I am, but that's not all that we do in this church.

And actually, that's part of, of, of the gift that I bring to this world. My identity as it is, and my capacity to claim that, are part of my feel of humanity, and part of my true gift in this world. Just as, I mean, our diversity is what makes life rich and interesting. Um, at the same time, because of where we are in our world, and I think this is partially a Southern thing, you know, like I mean if I lived in Boulder, or Berkeley, or New York City-

I wouldn't have to be making this set of apologies all the time. There's a part even where I have to say, "That's not all of who I am."

And I think this is one area when we talk about different kinds of differences, and it's not just, just about LGBTQ people, but I think one of the, the battles that we still struggle with, and I think this is very true in the South—maybe true elsewhere too; I mean I'm sure it's true elsewhere—but is is that we have even

people who want to be allies, who want to be open minded about this, but there's a physical reaction to it. I mean you know, I had a lady lean away from me while she was talking to me, like while she gonna like, catch the gay, or something. You know? And then so I'm, I'm one of, I'm certainly one of um, at this point, in, in certain circles, one of Alabama's more public lesbians-

Here, Jamie moved behind the block as if it is her pulpit; if possible, a special light here

And I claim that, it's important to me, but who I am in this world, and the work that I do is about the breadth of our, of, of the ways in which we, from my theological perspective, are all uh, made in God's image, and that's what's beautiful and wonderful. And so the ways in which we as a culture-

Are violent and oppressive around that, are things that we together must work together to undo. Does that make sense?

Colin: One of my favorite interactions among interviews that I didn't know about until after they happened was that Joan—a 76-year-old who prefers to be referred to as a gay woman—is part of Jamie's congregation.

Joan shared so much with me, because she has a lot to share. At the beginning of the interview she put her cat, Mars, in a separate room because she didn't want us to be interrupted. She spoke of the ways that she has felt more or less congruent with her identity throughout her life—which I thought was an interesting word choice. It offers a sliding scale of understanding and identification.

Despite all of her narratives, I couldn't shake the feeling that she could be my

grandmother. She has the same facial shape, and downy white hair whispering over her ears. The same sweet demeanor that I could tell hid a real firebrand personality.

The transition into Joan's characterization is softer than the others, on the descriptive lines above, Colin allows his face to move, his body to bend, his voice to soften into the affective "set" that becomes Joan. Joan herself is a kind of dichotomy—by far the oldest character, but with a wiry energy. She bends forward and back, a curved spine that shares the resilience with a tree branch that bends but has not yet broken. She is slower, softer, more wistful than the others, but has moments of bright-eyed intensity or surprising moments of chuckling at her own stories.

Joan: Well, coming out it was definitely paralleled with my spiritual journey.

Uh, my, I had been fairly active in my church up through my divorce, the time of my divorce, and two things happened. Uh, my husband was in the Army. He had gone through ROTC, and he had to do this two years afterwards.

And, uh, I, when I knew immediately that I, we'd been going to the ch- services, uh, the, at the church-owned base, on the base, and had met the chaplain, of course. And so, I knew something was wrong that I shouldn't be married and whatever, and I went to see him. And I said, "Something is terribly wrong. I married to a good man, but I really don't love him, and I don't know what to do." And he said something to the effect that, *[laughs]* you know, that he really couldn't help me, uh, except to encourage me to pray and strengthen my faith.

And that God would help me do what I needed to do to stay in my marriage. And

so, then, I go back, go to the University of Georgia, you know. And once we get, I, we were not married but a little over a year.

Go back to university of Georgia, um, getting involved for the first time with a woman. Uh, you know, okay, here it is. Now, what do I do with this? And then, I had, uh, all the message that this is not, you know, you're not supposed to do this. This, you know, all of the negative, this is terrible, whatever, whatever, but it feels so right, you know. And so, I went to, uh, I'd been real active in the Methodist, in the, in the Presbyterian Youth Fellowship when I was an undergraduate . . .

. . . which is right next door to the Methodist, and they were two of the liberal groups on campus. The university was integrated racially while I was an undergraduate, and we were the small group of students who stood with the African-American students.

So, I knew the, the chaplain of the Presbyterian group and was no longer there, but

I still knew the Methodist one. So, I went to see him, and I said, "I think maybe I'm gay and I don't know what to do about it." And he said, again, "I can't help you, but if I were in your shoes, I would try very hard not to be gay." So, I didn't get very helpful responses to the clergy that I reached out to. My mother had also said to me, uh, after my divorce, which was short, before I went back to the University of Georgia. She said you have, the issue about being gay was not part

of the divorce other than I kept saying, like, to them, I said . . .

. . . "I don't know what it is, but I'm not capable of loving Ralph the way I know a woman should love her husband. He's a good man. He's a good person, but I just don't love him enough. Got to find out who I am." And my mother said, "Well, you have broken my heart and shattered my faith."

So, those experiences just kind of said, "I'm done with religion." And I remember she, oh, Mother said, "I pray to God that he would not let this happen, that you would not get a divorce. I prayed about it. And now you're getting a divorce. And you broke my heart and shattered my faith." And I remember saying to her, "God is not responsible for my divorce. I'm taking responsibility for my life in saying that it's not right for me to be married."

So, I thought then I was supposed to be done with the church. [*laughs*] So, I, you know, I didn't get, you know, I left the church, so to speak.

Now, along the way, sometimes I would visit this church, I'd visit that church, you know. There's always kind of that pull there, but, uh, and I was a member of an Episcopal Church when I first came to Birmingham, that, you know, everybody knew, uh, I was somewhat out. Uh, and that was kind of nice. It was okay as long as you didn't talk about it very much.

Uh, but any- anyway, uh, I didn't really feel like I came home until I found this

Baptist Church.

Colin: Joan finally found her spiritual home in Jamie’s church, but finding your space in the South doesn’t just mean showing up at the right church. I have had tons of tensions with the church, starting with the time I was four, running down the center aisle and projectile vomiting all over the crimson carpet, and going all the way until today. Every Sunday when I’m home my mom will ask me to go. “I didn’t bring the right clothes,” I say, which is my way of avoiding the confrontation of saying, “I can’t sit through another anti-gay sermon, sorry.”

Sometimes, even the events that are supposed to welcoming to us feel strange or discordant depending on our identities. Akila is a Black lesbian lawyer in an interracial relationship who currently lives in Nashville, Tennessee. I interviewed her in the home she shares with her partner, Grace, about her complicated relationship to race in the South and what it means to be queer in Nashville.

Akila alternates between humor and introspection in her delivery; she relaxes back into the couch, when standing her weight is on her heels. She gestures with open hands frequently—fingers splayed, palms facing her body. At times, her hands will overlap just in front of her torso and pulse with a kind of steady rhythm as she considers her next statement.

Akila: That’s complicated. Um, because having so many sort of intersections of being a minority, I, there’s not, honestly, there’s not one space that I can go to where I can be completely comfortable.

Right? So, like, like, Pride was this weekend. So, I, it was great to, like, go and be

a part of all of that, but, so, I only went to Big Freedia for Pride. Which is, a Black artist. Um, so I go and I'm in this sea of people that are very gay friendly but there aren't very many Brown people. There are not a lot of Black people, you know? And, I mean, that's okay, but, you know, that's not a space in which I necessarily feel, sort of, the Black, sort of, facet of my identity is necessarily, you know, welcome, you know, as much as the sort of gay side, right? And then I can do things, like, this is a bad example 'cause they try really hard to welcome all the different . . . like, a Black Lives Matter sort of thing.

There's a ton of Black people there, but there aren't necessarily as many gay people there, right? So, it's, like, that gay facet might not necessarily be there. And, so, um, it's hard because I don't know that there is any one space that I feel completely just at home and it, you know, centered. And, I would say to my family, because family's everything to me and I spend a lot of time with my family, but, I mean, they're all Black, obviously, but there aren't a lot of gays. Um, they're all very, I guess, supportive of my lifestyle, I don't know what that means?

Um, but, I, you know, I have an aunt that I, if i have wedding I know won't be there. You know? It's, it's stuff like that. So, it's hard to say, I don't know, it's hard to say where I would feel completely comfortable. I don't know that there is a space like that. I, I actually didn't think about that until right now. But, yeah, I don't know that there is a space.

I mean, yeah, I think it's, kind of what we've talked about, like, just now, is, like,

there's not really any one space where I can just look around and say, I don't wanna say, that sounds exclusionary, but, like, "These are my people."

Um, but what it means to be a queer Southerner in Nashville? Um, I (laughs) so I'm, yeah, I'm just the biggest fan of, like, comment sections on Facebook and things. And I don't know if you know, there's a representative here in Tennessee who is just despicable, wretched-able woman. And she says despicable things about gays and terrible things and one of the bills she's trying to pass is, I'm losing the details, it's about, um, like, it's, like, the "Say Gay" bill or whatever, but it's like she's trying to resurrect. I think it's got, like, even more insidious, ridiculous stuff written in there, um, and she's clinging to it, she really is. Um, and I've . . . a friend from high school that comments on, for some reason, every Tennessean article that's ever existed, and he, every time he comments on something, like, it pops up in my feed and I always try to go read it, because it's usually pretty riveting.

And he just proceeds to roast this woman not on her policy and, you know, her worth as sort of a politician but on her inability to style her own hair. And it's hilarious, and it's a great read, and I'll forward it to you, you should look at it later, but he, the end of the comment is, "But bless your heart." And I think that is the most Southern, queer, just, thing. It's all just wrapped up into one. And I think that kind of sums it up. So he can roast this lady about her despicable politics but bless your heart. So I think that's it.

Scene 2: Grit and Resilience

Colin: Calvin is a trans man from Athens, Alabama in his thirties who comes from an eclectic but very religious background. I interviewed him at Athens State University, where he has a clerical job. He told me about his newfound activism—he works with queer youth—and what it means to him to make queer spaces.

Calvin has a certain gravel to his voice, pitched higher than my own, but somehow rougher. He is articulate but thoughtful, so sometimes he stretches his words to allow him time to think. He sits upright, with good posture. There's a certain kind of tightness to Calvin, a tension carried through the upper body.

Calvin: Um, like there's, there's just a lot that the South gets right. Um, it, it's so family oriented, and community oriented. Um, there's a [*leans in*] resilience to Southern people that I think have served Southern LGBTQ peoples especially well, kind of that rebelliousness, um, [*sitting more upright*] that grit that just comes with being a Southerner.

I think it means just being me, and creating space for others to just be them.

Um, I think sometimes the South's not always real good about that, because there's a big emphasis on who you're supposed to be. There's strong definitions for what men are, and what women are, and that's not even presentation. I mean, just even, um, behavior and the merits that each gender is supposed to espouse and embody, you know, honor, and, and strength, and a willingness to fight, versus

nurturing, and, and softness, and making pie. [*a sly smile*] Um, so, so creating, I think even for, you know, the hetero cisgender community, just a world where individuality matters, and is allowed, and is encouraged, and celebrated, I think that's the most important.

Colin: As I think of the roles Calvin speaks of, I think of my childhood. Of course, at the time I didn't realize it, but anything that could be read as queer was policed out of me as I got older. I was told not to tell other boys about *The Little Mermaid* computer game I was so excited about. My father was furious when my aunt bought me my very own Barbie—a first after a series of hand-me-downs from my older sister. The oversized shirt that I would wear as [*crossing*] I sashayed across the street to meet my middle-aged friend and neighbor, Sue, for breakfast was eventually taken away. The world seemed to remove queer possibilities at every turn, until we have enough agency to make our own.

Austin's way of making those possibilities is owning and operating the only gay bar in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Icon. Almost exactly one year after the Pulse shooting, I sit in a dark bar. I had been to Icon many times before. Icon had seen me on good nights and on bad nights. It's where I made out with my straight-ish college roommate. It's the first place I danced with my boyfriend in public. In college, my bathroom floor was littered with ripped wristbands emblazoned with same sex couples rendered through bathroom logos. One day I woke up, the black tread of the floor marked on my hand from, as a friend later informed me, helping

a drunken lesbian stand upright.

From his unique position just behind the bar Austin has seen a lot of college-aged queer folk come and go, and he sees them explore their identity.

I interviewed Austin in the dark bar during the day, on a barstool at the bar located directly in front of the entrance. He is mild-mannered, but he has a tendency to speak with his hands. He moves behind the block—which is, in essence, the bar—holding a cheap plastic cup.

Austin: Um . . . I mean, I guess, to me, I think gay bars are kind of always been home for me. I don't know if everyone feels the same way, but that's where I've always felt the safest, where I can be myself. And that's why, when I go to other towns, I love to go to other gay bars. And that's just where, to me, I've always felt safest and more comfortable.

[Rotating a bit] Like-minded individuals, I guess? Um, and that . . . The other purpose of the gay bar is to provide a safe space for everyone. That's the whole point.

Um, the . . . I guess the time when gay marriage was illegal. It probably . . . I think it was first passed in Alabama. I suppose seeing it on TV, the celebrations alone, but especially the night that the national was passed. I'll never forget that night. It was by far the busiest we've ever been here. And seeing people come support who were straight, and seeing everyone so happy. And it was just . . . I never thought . . . I didn't ever believe that would happen in my lifetime. So when that happened, it was just such a joyous celebration, it was like, okay, we're going

somewhere now.

Uh, it was, I mean, it was just a huge celebration. It was, I mean, we were busy early. People came in early, and there was a celebration in also [*gestures across the street*] the pizza place, uh, Mellow Mushroom. People came after that. It was just . . . I mean, people . . . I mean, all kinds of different people came in here to celebrate and knew to come here. Uhm . . . It was . . . And it's really kind of hard to describe. But it was just . . . Everyone was, I think . . . I don't want to say "relieved," but just so excited. And I just felt like it was our big break. Like we've been waiting for this for so long. Or something to make us feel like we were equal. And it finally was an acknowledgment of that.

Scene 3: Tension and Reconciliation

Colin: Now not everyone has a good bar experience, and the bar definitely isn't all there is to queer community. Often, though and especially in the South, the bar is the only queer designated spaces for people to go. Many people eventually take that sense of community beyond the bar either by creating and claiming their chosen or alternative families or by seeing the need for more or different queer-welcoming spaces, and "doing the work" to create those spaces. Through her experiences, Shekinah realized the need for what has become the TAKE—Transgender Advocates Knowledgeable Empowering—resource center.

Shekinah is a Black trans woman from Birmingham, and the only interviewee I

had that spoke directly to the camera throughout our time together. Shekinah was skeptical of me at first—expressing the ways in which the queer community has a tendency to benefit from trans folks struggles, but opened up, and by the time the camera was off, we were passionately discussing everything from the best food in town to Caitlyn Jenner’s precarious relationship to the trans community.

To denote the direct address employed by Shekinah, she is more performative and presentational than the other characters. She sits, shakes her hands, and moves the box forward—she wants to connect with her audience. Her voice is deep but feminine and she gestures with her hands just outside her breasts in order to frame her face as she delivers her message. Often, her hands will gesture out, but return to their palm-up positioning as she weighs her thoughts and experiences with her voice and body. She adjusts her hair and her dress before she begins.

Shekinah: You know, and so at that time I found out it was okay. That it was other people like me, is when I graduated from high school and I was able to go to my first alternative club, and honey, it wasn't . . . I was scared to go because I thought it was going to be more like flashing lights, and these gay men just jumping all around in there, and just everything. But just to show up in the club and see that there was so much diversity, it was so much fun, it was all type of identities, and as we say now, LGBTQ+, you know, community. All those people was in there in the alternative club; and so, it made me feel like I was home and at that time.

And at that time, I turned 19 that next year, because this was the late fall after I graduated, um, from high school. [*Opens and closes hands throughout this*

narrative] So, um, I kept going out to the club or whatever, and at that time I turned 19 that next May of 2002. I said, "Well you know what? I want to be a part of this." You know. I'm gonna let me hair down. And I was able to see and meet some of the role models in my life like, um, my alternative family. You know, Yazmin Campbell Starr, and Coco Chanel Starr; which Coco Chanel Starr is my alternative mother. And um, Yazmin Campbell Starr is my grandmother, and those ladies are the ones that was key in my life, that showed me the ropes and showed me everything that I needed, you know, to do to survive in this spectrum as being a trans woman. But at the time, they was into, you know, drag shows and female illusionist shows, so I wanted to start doing those to make money, because I had a job, but it wasn't good enough to balance out the life that I wanted for myself. So, I got into doing female illusionist shows, or whatever, I started liking that. And before you knew it, I was doing shows all around, everywhere I could do a show at.

And so, um, later on, maybe like a year or so later, um, I was just like, "You know what? It's hard trying to balance out these two identities." Going to work, you know, as a male, and presenting myself as female in the night. I'm just gonna go and push it to the edge. I want to go ahead and get me a legal name change. I want to go ahead, and you know, start, you know, transitioning, you know, by our black market 'mones, and doing all that good things, or whatever. And so I blossomed into, um, Miss Shekinah Denee Davis. You know.

Oh, it means so much to me to identify as Shekinah Dee, the Black, unapologetic trans woman; because I'm able to create spaces; I'm able to set standards; I'm able to break barriers. There, there will be no time when anyone that identifies as TWOC or QTPOC that needs assistance, needs resources, needs education, needs whatever that I'm not there to advocate and be an activist for them.

Here, everything was driven, um, from men having sex with men. So, they lump the trans identity in with men having sex with men. So, it made it so hard for you to be more authentic and true to who you were, because people was, you know, doing your testing, they was labeling you as men having sex with men. You know, the groups that you went to was trying to find a way . . . Because this is how TAKE was originally created, like, it's funny that you asked this question, because how TAKE was originally created was, I went in and set in on a men having sex with men group; due to that fact that I was looking for some type of support and trying to find myself. You know, as far as, you know, the things that we experience in the community. And, you know, I had full force accepted my identity, but just to show up into a space where it's a whole bunch of gay men and no one understand nothing that you go through, no one is identifying, have you . . . um, how you identify; and then, lastly, when I start my conversation and start asking questions, and you know, getting in, um, and for you know, as far as responding to the questions that they ask. Because I'll never forget this. I mean, it was a moment when they was asking me, um, asking everybody about their sexual preference.

And I told them, you know, I don't, you know, have any limits to my sexual preference. You know, I just like to love people for who they are, and whoever they may be, that's who, you know, I go with or whatever. And then, one of the persons was like, [*higher voice affect, complete with head wiggle*] "Oh, you mad if I ask you a question, or whatever." And I tell them, you know, "Yes, it's fine to ask a question." And he was like, "Oh, do you still use your private part?" And I was like, "Well, most definitely, that's what it's there for." And then, the whole room got into an uproar like, oh my God, (*"side-eyed"*) like, how could you say you're a lady and you . . . And it went crazy, and I'm just like, "No," like, I'm not gonna sit here and y'all said this was a no judgment zone, but as soon as I say something like that, just out of the scope of your closed mind, then it throws you into a fit. And y'all lookin at me some type of way, thinking that I'm interested, and y'all are just not understanding that a vagina doesn't define a trans woman.

You know, [*rubs her right leg*] so, I think that was just very key that prompted me to say, you need to create your own space.

Colin: [*Returning the box to its original location*] Shekinah's tensions with the idea of community aren't the only ones that I heard about. All of these tensions seemed to come from different places, though. Shekinah's came from her trans identity and the way the LGBTQ community sometimes forefronts those identities that are more easily assimilated into homonormativity.

Leigh has a similar story—while Leigh is not trans, they are nonbinary; however, their tensions with the community, come primarily from their bisexual identification.

I have known Leigh peripherally for about 14 years of my life. We share a hometown and many experiences, both Southern and Queer. When Leigh was coming to high school for the first time, my queer friends and I took them and their girlfriend out to Ruby Tuesday's. We didn't explicitly say, "Hey, we're the gays" but whatever passes for 15 year-olds' version of community and understanding was implied I think.

Leigh's interview took place in a mutual acquaintance's house. Leigh sits upright closer to one side of the block. Leigh's movement set is kind of erratic and tense; they sit with their legs close together at the beginning, but eventually cross their left leg over their right thigh before leaning all the way back. When standing, their gestures are staccato and forceful, but broken with more considered, slower moments. Their voice is fast, but clear, with strong diction and barely a trace of a more "traditional" Southern accent.

Leigh: Um, and I think that I was saying that the representations that I saw of queerness out in the world or my only experience with LGBTQ people, like, was very limited. And, in- in hindsight, like, very gay and lesbian specifically. And, so I thought that, well, that's not me for sure, so obviously this is not relevant to me. Obviously, I don't belong in that community. And, um, thinking about, like, things like a Pride parade or a Pride celebration and just feeling really like, "wow," as an introvert and, uh, like, a super anxious human being, um, that is not

something that I would probably, like, ever do. Which, I was in the parade-

-this past year, but that was the first time I was in it. Um, and it was mostly for work.

Um, but, so I thought if I- because I don't wanna participate in those things because that's not, like, who I am, then, then I must not be queer. I must not be LGBTQ, that's not my community and if I tried to insert myself into that then that would be unfair to other people.

Um, which is such internalized biphobia [*laughs*], but I didn't know that, um, when I was a younger person, um, but I know that now. Um, and I think that I didn't- I wasn't super insistent about calling myself bi until I read Shiri Eisner's book, which is called *Notes for a Bisexual Revolution*, and it's super good and interesting and reflected a lot of the dynamics that I had experienced in my own life and how people reacted to my identity, either when I told them I was bi or um, when they were making assumptions about who I was and not even thinking that it would be possible for someone to be bi. Um, like, well, this is a tangent, I won't do that. Um . . .

[*Laughs*] Well, I guess like something that I'm thinking of in particular is, like, when I first got involved with the GSSA, which is the Gay Straight Student Alliance-

-really unfortunate name, at UAB when I was in school, um . . . We were trying to do something for the Pride parade, which like s- again, felt really foreign to me, um, because that wasn't, like, who I was. Like, i-it's not something that I would like participate in if it weren't at all linked to my queerness. But I was like "Okay, well I should do this obviously, 'cause the rest of the group is doing it." And it's super hokey. They wanted to do, like, some weird marching band thing, which I was like, "I remember how to play an instrument! Like, I can play, like, a, I don't know, clarinet version-

-of, like, Lady Gaga or something-

-in this Pride parade." Um, so it was, like, kind of, like, super hokey but kinda fun. Um, and I had borrowed an instrument from someone else, um, in the organization, and so she'd given it to me. And we ended up not doing the parade thing, which I was so thankful for. And I had to drop this clarinet off back with her, and I brought my partner at the time, and- and prior to this, she had asked me, um, when I got the instrument from her to begin with. "Oh, it's- you know we don't have a lot of straight people in the GSSA." And I was just like, "I'm not straight." And internally I was not- "I'm not fuckin' straight," like *[laughs]*, why would I be here? *[cradles head in hands]* Um, but I think people often perceive bi folks as overly-invested allies-

Because they aren't even operating from a perspective where bi people even exist.

So not thinking about that. Um, [*a chopping into an open palm motion for emphasis, on bolded words*] so she sees **me** with my **partner**, who is a **guy**, **and** thinks, "Oh, this is some generic straight girl who wants to participate in this." Um, and so I- I corrected her and told her that I wasn't straight but I didn't tell her, like, "I'm bisexual, actually." Um, and so when I come drop this clarinet off with her when we, like, trashed this idea [*crosses legs, leans back*] of marching in the Pride parade and playing, um, instruments, um, I brought my partner with me and we were just, like, gonna drop this off at her house, go do what we were gonna do, and she go- like, I think she had . . . [*looking upward*] She had addressed my partner as though he were a woman, and he's trans, um, and so like, not only, like, did you misgender my partner, but you had so convinced yourself that the only possibility of someone telling you they're not straight is that they must be a lesbian . . .

. . . and so obviously my partner is a woman because if my partner wasn't a woman then I wouldn't belong here. Um, and so just, like, the mental gymnastics [*gestures with hands in front of face, and then holds a loose fist*] that people will do in order to try to avoid even acknowledging that bi people exist, um and are in queer spaces and deserve to be in queer spaces, um . . . Just something that- that comes to mind for me particularly.

Colin: For me, my willingness to be in queer community was inhibited by internalized homophobia—luckily Calvin and Leigh's work with queer youth show younger people more willing to embrace communities built amongst LGBTQ people and support each other through the unique struggles they face. After managing to

come out, I still found myself not quite fitting in. It was my body.

I was too fat. Too hairy. I came of age during a time where thin, frosted tipped men were the “thing” in larger gay culture, and I was neither thin nor frosted-tipped. I remember disappointment. [*Kneeling over the block, pantomiming the narrative*] Hiding in the bathroom, water running to disguise the sounds, hunched over and around the toilet to catch debris, I dragged a razor over my sensitive skin [*hits chest on each iteration*] again and again and again—the first time I shaved the front half of my body, only to find out that even without the hair, I was still fat. And now I was covered in little red pockmarks and cuts because [*standing again*] I didn’t know what the hell I was doing.

It was like I was preparing myself for the consumption of some kind of queer male gaze.

Nick, a biracial gay man from Clarksville, Tennessee, had a similar experience, calling his early impressions of the LGBTQ community a “meat market.” I interviewed him in the home of a mutual friend in Nashville, Tennessee. He demanded to be well lit for the videotaped interview, drink in hand, [*moving to recline on the box in the style of Nick*] and when he noticed his toes in particular were in frame, implored: “Yes! Let them see my crusty-crusts” before the interview began.

Nick sits back into the stage left side of the block, almost as if it is a chaise lounge. He,

like Shekinah, wants an audience. He is performative and large—sweeping, relaxed-wrist hand gestures; consistent affirmative filler questions such as “right?”; a pronounced vocal fry that places him between what could be read as a stereotypical “gay male” affect and a teen movie surfer dude. When moving, his weight settles in his hips and he privileges the presentation of his legs (which he loves) by standing in a slouching open-third foot position.

Nick: I just think, 'cause I think when I . . . my very first Pride, right? So I think this was, like, 2000, 2001. And uh, I had, you know, my- my close group of friends there were like five or six of us, and the night before, so, I was like maybe . . . 18 at the time. Uh, and the night before, we didn't know what to do. You know, we had never been through it before. So, like, the night before we were, like, sitting in my bedroom, like, making posters and shit. And, like, the next day, like, I went there just having this imagination of what I thought it would be, just kind of like what I'd seen on TV of, like, "Oh, this great community! And everyone's gonna love each other, and it's gonna be great."

[A lot of hand gestures, moving fluidly from one to the next, during this section] It was, like, you know what the gay community is, right, it was like a meat market and a hookup, and rejection, and all of these things. And um, I think that's kind of just the part that I've, either I've struggled with --with the community . . . It's like, "Oh, you know, they're people too, right? Just because these are, you know, queer people, LGTB people, that . . . they- they are flawed humans as well, and they have, uh, character, uh, issues as well, just like anybody else, right?" So that just being a lesbian, gay, trans, bi person does not mean you a monopoly on . . .

understanding the world, right? It's not this, uh, unique position that elevates you above anybody else. That we're just, you know, regular people. And I think that's kind of the thing that I've, um, had to come to terms with over the years.

Um . . . I- I think really, just . . . the- the experiences that I, that I had with- with my friends growing up. 'Cause again, I'm just growing up in Clarksville-

. . . in this small town, and having . . . uh, it . . . I had this group of friends. Some of them, I did . . . are part of the community, some of them aren't, but you know, definitely allies. But you know, we always had the- the . . . or at least I did, anyway, I'm just assuming that they did, too . . . have this feeling that it was, like, all of us against the world. Right, you know? It was kind of like that- that old, like, the- the tragic queer [*hand flourish*] thing, and, like, everyone's out to get us? So I think those moments where we would be out in public spaces, and my friend Steven would be, like, wearing, like, a skirt or something, and people would yell at us.

Or we would go out to, after the- the gay bar in Clarksville got closed down, we'd have to go into . . . you know, we'd go out, you know, we were 21, 22, so we wanted to go out. And we'd go out to, you know, straight bars, whatnot, and um . . . You know, there- there was one night that my friend Justin and I, and our friend Bianca, we were outside and there- there's, like, these four or five guys in a pickup truck, and they were just, like, yelling "Faggots! We're gonna kill you!"

You know, like, "Fuck you, you faggots!" And . . . uh, just, like, having . . . And my friend Cathy comes out, and she, you know, she's always been kind of like the . . . [*a realization*] um, she's actually younger than me, but she's always, like, just been this, like, this [*upper body gesture indicating strength, toughness*] butch dyke, and she's been, like, you know, the papa dyke of- of the group. And she's like, you know, [*confrontational affect a la Cathy*] "I'll fuck you up!" So, like, those kind of moments of, like, us, like . . . facing adversity. Like, th- those are what I think of, as far as kind of those- those types of experiences, where I'd say "This is, these are my people. Right? We- we're in this together."

Epilogue: True Colors

Projection Cue: Rainbow Flag .gif

Colin takes a small step forward with each vignette, unbuttoning his shirt in the process.

Colin: I am fourteen or fifteen in Athens, Alabama. I am on a trampoline looking up to the stars, spilling secrets, disclosing my life, cold springs tickling my too-tall feet, supported by the bouncy mesh and my queer friends.

I am nineteen in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. I am in Icon next to my lesbian best friend Allison. Bambi Kira, a middle-aged (and that's probably a generous reading) drag queen is on the stage. We both hear the opening notes of Cher's "Dark Lady" and, because some stereotypes are too good to resist, we look into each other's eyes, each pull out a dollar bill, and go to tip that damn queen.

I am twenty-six in Carbondale, Illinois. The bar is mostly empty, but we play

some Whitney Houston or something—we all wanna dance with somebody, so we dance with each other.

I am twenty-seven in Nashville, Tennessee; it's Pride weekend only a few weeks after the Pulse shooting. Only a few weeks wondering after I began wondering if I would ever feel safe in a queer space again. I am at an event called Queer Dance Party. I'm surrounded by people I don't know and barely know. On the stage is a big bear of a drag queen surrounded by a pouf of black organza. Her makeup is sweating into her beard as Cyndi Lauper's "True Colors" comes on. As she lip-syncs and wipes sweat from a made-up brow with an unshaven forearm, all of us in the audience grab each other, we look at each other, we move with each other, we are *present* with each other.

Colin opens his button-down shirt to reveal a tee-shirt underneath, which says, "Y'all Means All."

These are my people.

It is us against the world.

Music Cue: "Make Your Own Kind of Music" by Mama Cass

Blackout

End of Performance

CHAPTER 4

BODY TALK: STAGING QUEER ORAL HISTORY PERFORMANCE

I am in the Marion Kleinau Theatre, on Southern Illinois University's campus in Carbondale. The theatre is now "mine" after the previous show has completed its run and until Bless Our Hearts is rehearsed and staged at the end of the month. It two weeks before I am to preview roughly half of this show at the Petit Jean Performance festival in Arkansas for an audience of undergraduate students, graduate peers, and faculty members whom I have looked up to since I first came to the field of performance studies. As I start to think about the ten-or-so rehearsals I have to create the world of this performance and its coinciding rules, I get more than a little bit anxious.

Luckily, my advisor, mentor, and co-director, Craig Gingrich-Philbrook is there to help shepherd me through the process, acting as a kind of mid-wife for the birth of my own vision for this project. At the beginning we talk, and then we pull roughly ten chairs from the backstage, the hallway, and the classroom next door and place them on the stage. As I did with the interview transcripts, we look at them—disparate and similar. We take stock of them, a stool, a desk, what we colloquially in the department refer to as "the throne." We arrange them in the now-crowded space and take a few steps back. I walk amongst them. We rearrange them. I assign different chairs to different individuals: Calvin gets a desk, because I interviewed him on a college campus; Shekinah gets "the throne" because of her strong and declarative personality.

As we always do when embarking on a new performance, we get in the space and begin to play with the text and the bodies that are or will be present in the performance. The chairs aren't quite working; they are crowding the space and will be unwieldy for traveling the show as I intended to do. We try putting them on risers to clean up the sightlines. Still, we agree, the

chairs are a “big no.”

“It’s a solid idea, but it’s just not working correctly,” we agree again. This is maybe not the first, but perhaps the most pronounced, issue we had to address at the beginning of the staging process.

In a similar fashion to Chapter Three, this chapter offers a view into the process of creating a performance based upon my tenets for practicing queer oral history. As that chapter did, this one offers a model for actualizing a queer oral history. Goffman (1959) offers us theatrical metaphor as a way to theorize the ways we exist and communicate in daily life, and Turner (1980) looks at the ways that staged dramas mirror the systems that govern our daily interactions. In what ways, then, would it be productive for me to re-stage interviews that, although not necessarily everyday interactions, are mostly composed of everyday language on the part of the interviewees? Stucky’s (1988) answer is that such an “event is informative for both aesthetic reasons [a meta-performance of natural conversations] and for the insights such performance can bring to our understandings of natural talk” (p. 28). This “natural talk” on the part of my queer Southern interviewees offers an honesty that may be elided in a more manufactured aesthetic text; while the interview event is a kind of performance on the part of the interviewees, it is distinct from the structure of a crafted “performance persona” that would yield more considered and rehearsed narratives during the event. Through engaging each interview in this mode, and then reperforming them, I am able to observe and perform things that might be “rehearsed out” of a more considered performance. For example, on stage my posture is much different than it is during a conversation on a couch; I am more aware of it, my back is usually straighter, concerned about looking good in front of people. Conversely, on a couch, I am likely

to be slumped over or sinking into the cushions—perhaps my feet are under me or splayed all over the place. In ways, observing this “version” of myself offers a perhaps truer indication of how I am in life, and therefore allows a greater chance of understanding the conditions that govern and create my daily existence. Through this focus on everyday, semi-conversational, and relaxed interview events (that mostly took place in the homes of my interviewees), I am able to access bodies and words in a context with less premeditation or rehearsal. This in turn allows a different—not necessarily better or worse—value in crafting the performance that does not exist the same way in the recreation of more conscientiously prepared aesthetic texts.

This chapter offers a look into my negotiations of the identities and texts included within *Bless Our Hearts*, aided throughout the process by Gingrich-Philbrook. I maintained my commitment to an ethical and dialogic performance, as informed by Conquergood (1985). I also followed Stucky’s (1993) call, expanded upon earlier in the dissertation (Chapters One and Three), to see the transcripts as another version of my performance script. Still, I found myself saddled with questions and concerns as we worked to bring interviews from the page to the stage. As this chapter recalls that process in order to offer it as a model, it addresses the development of *Bless Our Hearts* in three ways. First, I offer a look into our staging process—focused on the challenges we faced and the choices we made to address those concerns. Then, I look to the ways reperformance strengthened my engagement with the interviewees through what I think of as “body conversations.” Finally, I reflect on the ways that my opportunities to reperform these (re)performances influenced my thinking about this project, including feedback that I received from various iterations of the show.

Challenges and Choices

As I approached staging *Bless Our Hearts*, both Craig (Gingrich-Philbrook) and I kept

certain commitments and questions in mind. Perhaps the largest guiding concern throughout the process was maintaining the spirit of Conquergood's (1985) articulations of dialogic performance. In order to offer an archive and consideration of this process, first I look to these commitments that we held and then the choices we made to honor those commitments in my embodied performances of others.

As I treated each interview as an aesthetic text to be performed, I wanted to do so in an ethical and considerate way. I took the notions of dialogue and "experiential insight" from Conquergood's work and wanted to apply them within two relationships that occur within the performance: performer to text and performer to audience. The dialogue between performer and text is one of the first and foundational negotiations that must happen as a performer takes an oral history project from page to the stage; the performer works as a medium to channel what E. Patrick Johnson (2008) calls the "storytelling event" (p. 10)—the interview—into a format that can be readily communicated to and interpreted by an audience who (in most cases) was not present for this event.

Even as I maintained my vision for queer oral history—looking for connections between my interviewees and myself and considering myself as a subject-researcher—I still found that reperforming some of the identities included in my pool of interviewees gave me pause. How would Shekinah's identity—as in her words an "unapologetic Black trans woman"—look when performed on my white, queer, male-read body? How do I perform the nonbinary gender identity of Leigh when my own body reads as masculine in so many ways? (I am heavyset, with a scruffy face, hairy body, and a receding hairline). These are questions that I wrestled with through my performance studies coursework. My own personal experiences with these concerns about performing difference align almost identically with Conquergood's (1985) example of the

skeptic's cop-out.

The assignment is to perform a section of The Color Purple, a book that I have read for each of my three degrees. The cover of my book is what you might call well-loved, the borders of the pages tattooed with marginalia in green, and blue, and . . . well, the color purple. Despite having engaged this text in classes on African-American women's literature and representations of Black women in film, this performance of Southern literature course is the first time I am asked to internalize the text, to put it in my body and then display it for an audience.

I am taking this class at a time when the debate about straight and cisgender actors portraying queer folk in Hollywood is at what feels like an all-time high. Jared Leto and Eddie Redmayne receive heaps of praise for playing trans women with tragic stories. Straight men have played queer men in almost all of the mediated representations of myself that I have seen—from Will and Grace in my childhood, to Ryan Murphy's television empire of shows like Glee and American Horror Story. As someone who grew up doing theatre, the issue feels complicated and messy. I've bristled at directors' assertions that, as a queer man, I cannot "play straight," so in some ways this feels similar. Ultimately though, when there are fewer queer roles (than straight roles) for actors who are also told they cannot "play straight," it becomes increasingly important to involve marginalized folks with/in their own mediated and staged representations.

I start thinking about how to perform from The Color Purple while not ignoring the ethical dimensions of representation. The book is written primarily in the voice of Celie—an uneducated, poor Black woman during the late 1800's into the 1900's. Performing the dialect of Celie—an essential part of her voice, and thus, the text—is exactly what gave me pause. I turned to the professor, Rebecca Walker, for advice. I had already rationalized the difference between a

capitalist Hollywood performance and our classroom exercise—that performing for a classroom of fellow students is not for capital gain, but an exercise in learning. Essentially, a classroom performance is aiming for the dialogic understanding central to performing across difference that has since become central to my practice; however, at that time, I still felt concern about approaching the assignment and performing Celie. The professor turned me, once again, towards Conquergood (1985), who explains (as noted in earlier chapters) that to not engage in a performance of the other is an example of “The Skeptic’s Cop-Out”—a performative pitfall that negates any ability to learn or gain empathy from performing identities disparate from our own. Conquergood also offers a similar example—a student uncomfortable with the idea of performing the identities within The Color Purple.

While this assuaged some of my misgivings, it was looking for spaces of dialogue between the text and myself that ultimately gave me comfort in the performance. While still maintaining Celie’s voice and identity, I looked to the queer content of the book in a scene that I found connections within. I ultimately performed a section dealing with the queer break-up of protagonist, Celie, and bisexual chanteuse, Shug Avery. As asked of a performer by Conquergood’s descriptions of dialogic performance, I sought to honor both difference and similarity as I staged these identities that were different than my own.

This was early in my coursework, and these tensions are ones that I have continued to wrestle with as I engage difference in my extended graduate work—namely Bless Our Hearts and this dissertation. In performance, we are told time and again that doing is a deeper way of knowing, and in this case, performing The Color Purple was the first time that I engaged with Conquergood’s moral map in a knowing and embodied way. Through engaging Walker’s text and being steered away from the pitfall of “the skeptic’s cop-out,” I found myself looking for

similarity alongside difference, in a way that became foundational to my approach to scripting and performing Bless Our Hearts.

That experience heavily colored my approach to finding dialogue between my interviewees and myself within the performance. After considering this ethical element to dialogic performance, I turned to what I think of as the other major area of dialogue in a staging of interview-based research: the dialogue that happens between the performance/performer and the audience. Pelias and Shaffer (2007) note the ways that performing a text for an audience is an act of embodied translation. The performer, through their own analysis and dialogue with the text, interprets the text for the audience. In turn, the audience interprets the performance in a myriad of ways. Wallace Bacon (1966) points out that too much consideration of the audience can be detrimental to the act of interpretation. “One of the dangers of the audience [is] that it may distract the reader [or performer] from the work of art and lead him [sic] to play to his listeners at the expense of the work of art” (pp. 24-25).

When it came to staging these interviews, and to borrow another metaphor from Bacon’s (1960) oeuvre, I was caught between the “dangerous shores” of ethical representations of my interviewees and my desire to create a palatable performance that allowed the audience to maintain a deep engagement with the content of the interviews. The answer to the first of these shores seemed to be a careful adherence to the practice of everyday life performance (ELP); however, as my interviewees were uniformly sitting, this solution seemed at direct odds with the second of the presented shores—to engage an audience. Maybe Wallace Bacon would bristle at the choice I ultimately made, but I could not bring myself to present an hour-long show of seated interviews. What resulted from these considerations and conversations with my co-director was a

looser approach to ELP. I would still take into account during rehearsal and preparation all that ELP asks of us—posture, body carriage, verbatim delivery (including fillers, false starts, and other mis-speakings), but in staging we would free ourselves to play within the space, even if the interview took place on a couch. I think of this practice as an “interpretive ELP” that allows space to interrogate the text of the interview and present the content in dynamic ways that stay true to the spirit of the text and its corresponding storytelling event. I’ll offer select models of what these choices looked like for this process a bit later in the chapter.

Beyond those major challenges, we made choices in scope, eschewing the chairs mentioned at the beginning for a simpler “performance in a suitcase” (as Gingrich-Philbrook noted it during rehearsals) aesthetic. The opening frame of the show is a recreation of an interview event—in some ways a loose ELP of my own role during the interview interaction. I entered with a bag and set up recording equipment—a camera and a microphone—as I spoke to a box at the center of the stage. The box, sitting just slightly askew of center, took the place of the chairs, couches, and barstools my interviewees sat at, and became the central hub of the piece. With these choices, both the text and the protocol for *Bless Our Hearts* were in place, but I found more moments of dialogue and empathy as I started to rehearse the embodiment of each individual whom I had interviewed.

Body Talks: The Instructive Dialogue of Reperformance

Similar to the initial concerns about staging Shekinah that I mentioned above, each interviewee offered their own challenges and negotiations in (re)performance. I aimed to reunite the body with the narratives that poured from and shaped it. In turn, I acknowledge that those narratives and memories live within the embodied realities of each participant, and re-enacting in this way is vital for reaching Conquergood’s ethical ideal of dialogic performances of the other. I

approached each embodiment with the broad ideas I had synthesized from teaching introductory performance courses, “finding” each individual through the process of playing, testing, and choosing before reaching the presentation stage (Pelias & Shaffer, 2007). Following Pelias & Shaffer (2007) I wanted to find moments of empathy—noting moments of *recognition*, times when experiences *converged* into my understanding, and ending in performance with *adoption* (p. 105-106). In conversation with Conquergood (1985), though, I still wanted to be able to acknowledge the moments of difference that emerged within my analysis of the interviews, and not let my search for empathy “wash away” these moments that made my interviewees distinct from myself and each other.

The challenges I faced in terms of embodiment ranged from interviewee to interviewee and story to story; as I tried to allow these stories to be re-lived in and through my own, different body, I found different points of tension on a spectrum ranging from the familiar to the different. While I conceive of these as this spectrum, in reality each individual comes into the interview, and also the show, with different embodied realities that influence how they exist and how they are perceived that move beyond demographic identification and into lived histories and the physical habits that emerge from their histories. I choose to think of them within this spectrum as my own organizational tactic; in part, this was practical—it allowed me to conceive of how different I would have to make my body and my movement in order to stage each individual within the show. I also locate this similarity and difference on a mixture of perceived and avowed identity markers—I asked each interviewee for their identifications at the beginning of the interview, but also noticed the ways those identities influenced their embodied realities. The ways that Leigh—a white nonbinary bisexual—and Akila—a Black lesbian—exist are influenced by their identities. By orienting to them on this spectrum, it not only reminds me to

take stock of both similarity and difference as I consider and recreate my interactions with them, but it serves as a reminder for me to be aware of myself as the “neutral” space during the performance. My body has affect and habits that I must neutralize at times to assume the bodies and habits of my interviewees. To illustrate this, I have chosen five particular individuals from the show where the embodied interaction between myself and the narratives of participants (Grace, Leigh and Calvin, Joan, and Shekinah) illuminated the tensions, potentialities, or revelations of my methodological approach.

As I engage in these examples, though, I engage another tension. Elyse Pineau (2000) reminds us that as practitioners of performance situated in the academy, we inhabit an in-between space. It feels necessary—in publications, or here, in a dissertation—to succumb to the scriptocentrism of the Western academy structure despite performance’s commitments to embodied or “enfleshed” modes of epistemic inquiry (2). “There is,” Pineau reminds us, “no substitution for the presence of the human body in the immediacy of performance.” So, I offer these five examples with that acknowledgment; while I describe my own observations and my physical feelings as I restage these disparate individuals, I know that there is no way to truly recapture the immediacy of my own body from the contexts of performing this show.

Grace

Yes. Yeah, okay. So, I visited the Midwest a little bit, and I think the difference between, like, the South and the Midwest is, like, when you're walking in the grocery store, Southern people will, like, smile at you and say hi and then, as soon as you walk away, talk shit. And in the Midwest, they will just stare at you like you're trash immediately, and I can't decide which one I like better. (p. 87)

Grace was the first person I interviewed, and I have known her for about 25 of my 29

years. To put it mildly, she is my best friend. The project came from my work about the tensions I've felt at the intersections of my own queer and Southern identities, and I knew she had felt a lot of the same tensions, and shared a lot of the same experiences. We have often joked that we are the same person—the same interests, the same taste in liquor, the same love of baking.

As I approached reperforming someone so close to me, I had some unique anxieties. I did not want to get it wrong, because she means a lot to me, and also she was more likely than anyone else to see the performance. (As a sidenote, she did attend the performance on closing night of its run at Southern Illinois University.) We all have more than likely reperformed someone while telling our own stories, but documenting someone and placing a version of them on the stage seems so much more official, calculated, and high-stakes than just doing their voice during a casual conversation.

To resolve the tension I felt, I found myself leaning into our similarities, but noting the differences in our posture and voice—the way she moves back and forth when she talks, shifting weight back and forth between her hips. Even as I do not stage it through costume, I think of the object language of her tights and A-line dresses. I think of her higher vocal pitch, full of shifts similar to my own vocal dynamics but pushed from the chest into the head. I notated all of that in the scripting process and focused in on her use of verbal fillers to further distinguish her from the version of myself that I perform on stage. Verbal fillers became key to many of the reperformances, as I noted a distinct difference between the different interviewees—Grace and Nick, who are friends with each other before and beyond this project, use a similar abundance of “like” as a filler between thoughts, whereas Jamie employs either a trailing “uhhhhh” or a simple elongation of the word that would have otherwise preceded the space where verbal fillers might have occurred.

With Grace, I found my hands loosening—again similar to Nick—as they gestured more fluidly than my own. The wrists—limper than my own natural carriage—punctuate words with flings forward or collapse inward toward the body during more introspective or thoughtful moments of text. As I sit in a coffee shop in Florida and reflect on performing her—my face elongates. I pull my temples back and my eyebrows up. I think of a few lines from her interviews and mouth them to myself, trying to privately recreate my performances of her. My mouth hangs open, just a bit while I think, and as I proceed through the text in my mind, my eyebrows expand upward and then crash down towards my eyes—not an angry brow, but a considerate one. As the words progress, they wriggle up one at a time—showing judgments and feelings about the Midwest, the South, and mutual acquaintances—before again rising towards the hairline, pulling the face into a position that is longer and more open.

Grace and I have a lot of similarities, and as noted in the script, our conversations about reconciling our queerness and Southernness are foundational to this project. Still, though, I am a big, scruffy, white, gay man from a working-class family, and she is white lesbian from a relatively affluent family in my hometown. We both have expressive voices and mannerisms, but I find myself reflecting on the ways that gender has modulated both of our daily performances of self. She finds reconciliation between queerness and Southernness through a performance that I think of as “high-femme homemaker.” This performance involves lots of A-line dresses and skirts, a well-stocked kitchen, and some truly exceptional baked goods. Grace’s markers of femininity—along with her occupation as a preschool teacher—encourage a performance of self that is more readily read as expressive and fluid. As a gender/queer man who aligns in many ways with femininity, but still primarily presents as masculine, much of her performance feels natural to me, but many aspects feel as if they are inclinations that have been policed from my

own body.

Leigh and Calvin

Leigh and Calvin provided different challenges. While Grace and I are both wild talkers who use our hands a not-inconsiderable amount, Leigh and Calvin forced me to think of the ways that our gender expressions and social pressures of passing modulate the ways we embody our own experiences. Leigh and Calvin were both assigned female at birth, but they identify in different ways now. Calvin is a trans man from a religious upbringing, and Leigh is a nonbinary bisexual individual. As I worked to embody them—in spite of their very different rhythms and movements, I found some similarities between their embodied presentations. Both of them perform and embrace a somewhat restrictive masculinity in place of the femininity they had previously performed, either through identification (Calvin) or social pressures (Leigh). Neither of them employs a lot of embodied auto-tactile communication—straightening clothes or touching hair. This contrasts most of the interviews where my interviewee avows a more feminine identity—Shekinah and her preening gestures (discussed later) for instance. Calvin performed a widely variant version of gender before beginning his transition—at times dressing in very feminine clothing and at others presenting in masculine ways that more heavily mirror the way that I see him during our interview. Leigh, on the other hand, has maintained what I read as an increasingly genderqueer performance of self from when I knew them at a younger age until now. At the time of our interviews, they both present a kind of physical stricture that seems to show the similarities between how their AFAB (assigned female at birth) bodies contrast with their own identifications. The stricture of their demeanor during our interview seems to manifest in the object choices that they both make as part of their presentation of self, e.g., their clothing.

Leigh tends to wear tight clothes that would be read as “masculinely cut”: button downs

and coats, relatively plain shorts, bow ties, tight tee shirts as undershirts. Again, despite lack of costuming in performance, the object language of each interviewees' self-performance influences my body as a performer. When performing Leigh and considering these things, the embodied considerations of clothing choice as it relates to their nonbinary gender identity aligned with their self-described "anxious, introverted" personality. They speak quickly and passionately, but also with a certain kind of urgency and immaculate diction: "I don't think I was really insistent on calling myself bi until I read Shiri Eisner's book, *Notes for a Bisexual Revolution*. And it's super good and super interesting . . ." (p. 107). During this quoted passage, Leigh speaks incredibly quickly but in a clean and understandable way. As I reviewed Leigh's interview, the clothing, the posture, and the occasional speed combined to align with what I began to think of as physical markers of their anxious persona. In performing Leigh, I force my back into a stick-straight line emerging from the black theatre block that I sit on. My feet—usually all askew and uneven as myself—are planted firmly into the floor. I imagine my toes gripping at the ground, pulling wrinkles of earth into the arches of my feet. I place my hands stiffly in my lap, and when the center of my back begins to hurt just a little, I know that I have found Leigh's posture. My body feels a little stiff, a little stoic, my brow furrows, and I clench my jaw. As I pull back my face muscles—in a position that reminds me of an animal's ears when on alert—I feel the tension in my temples, I run my tongue behind every tooth, discreetly engaging in a warm-up for my mouth in order for my tongue to survive Leigh's rapid pace. This is anxiety; this is the body of an introvert put into a situation where they are speaking and being recorded. Leigh, and thereby my own body, loosens as the narratives progress, but the opening posture of their interview is a reminder of their strict clothing, their strict posture, and the ways that this heavy modulation of self stems from the intersections of their gender and their anxiety.

When performing Calvin, I think of his upright body and straight shoulders. Calvin has an almost-austere posture, centered on his chest, with a certain sense of weight that comes from the chest binder that he wears. The posture is similar to Leigh in many ways, but it carries less tension and more weight—a weight that at once feels like a crushing and an ironically relaxed gravitas when placed into my own body. In performance, I find myself emulating the way he holds his elbows close into his body, almost as if gravity is pulling downward on his shoulders. Frankly, to consider the binding around his chest is uncomfortable, and it affects the way Calvin narrates his experiences and the ways that I am able to reperform those narratives. Centering this tension around the chest and through the shoulders changes the ways that I am able to move as a performer. I feel the trapezoid and rhomboid muscles of my upper back pull and flex as I hold his posture—stretching to accommodate the gravity I push down onto the crook of my arm. Occasionally due to a shoulder defect within my own body, I feel the tingle of a slight spasm travel through the right side of my neck, a reminder of the ways our bodies are different, and the ways that reperformance will always be an imperfect recreation. I imagine the chest binder again, and the tension expands into my pectoral muscles; I think—maybe problematically in some ways—of drag kings I have seen who pull their breasts to the side using duct tape. While I have often had tensions with my own body, I think of the privilege of never having to engage in this kind of daily performance so that my body could align with my own identity. As I engage the posture, I am thankful that Calvin’s section is short, because frankly, he is uncomfortable.

The shifts in my own body change the way that I am able to speak as well. The tensions create a strain in my voice—a strain that makes it easier to recreate Calvin’s voice from the interview recordings. Our voices, after all, are physical instruments, and engaging the muscles that surround the various apparatuses that create and conduct sound through our bodies, while

uncomfortable, is an aid to the recreation of Calvin's voice, body, and experiences. I perceive my own voice as relatively dynamic and full-bodied; in years of doing theatre and performance I have never been told to be louder. My voice has a natural projection to it, an open resonance that contrasts with the restraint Calvin's embodied tensions and chest binding put into his voice. As I try to recreate those tensions in my own body and then speak, I hear the light gravel of Calvin. The pitch is admittedly different; his mid-transition vocal pitch was and is hard for me to "nail down" through my own vocal performance. It is as if it is higher than mine, but has a lower quality in some way—I characterize this light gravel as the result of this tension. I, once again, particularly find this gravel—a masculinized vocal fry, maybe—in the space between words. I locate it in breaths and verbal fillers. As he comes out of a thoughtful pause, he notes, "Um, I think sometimes the South's not always real good about that . . ." (p. 99). It is in the way that he trails into that line I find the gravel; I find the tension. He leans forward, and I lean forward—elbows still close to our sides, back not curving, perhaps held upright by the tight fabric around his chest. The tension remains, and in that tension, I find the fricative quality of his voice.

Joan

Joan is a 76-year-old who does not align with terms like "queer" or "lesbian." Instead, she just prefers to be called "a gay woman" (p. 92), as she explained to me. I lead into her segment by noting, "She shared a lot with me, because she had a lot to share. She came out before Stonewall, but despite all of her narratives, I couldn't shake the feeling that she could be my grandmother" (p. 92) As I continue, I start to embody the physical aspects that Joan shares with my grandmother: "They have the same facial features, the same wispy white hair disappearing over their ears, the same sweet demeanor that I can tell hides a real firebrand personality" (p. 93). This slippage allows the audience into one aspect of the queer oral history

process—mirroring the ways I script and build a movement set for each interviewee based upon the footage of their interview.

Joan’s embodied performance of self is somehow at once exactly what one would expect and nothing like one would expect. At times, the kinesic quality of her movements offers contrasts in surprising ways. She has a curve to her lithe trunk that alternates between curving into the cushions of her sofa and curving her body over towards the coffee table that set between us. The challenge to embodying her is embodying the double bind of her aged/aging body and the sprightly energy with which she revisits the moments of her past—it comes down to a juxtaposition of choices in tempo, tone, and posture. Allowing her to softly interrupt her flow to smile or laugh about something she says, while envisioning and embodying the ways her hands with their paper-thin skin fold on top of her lap as she remembers hardship with a laugh:

So, I knew the, the chaplain of the Presbyterian group and was no longer there, but I still knew the Methodist one. So, I went to see him, and I said, "I think maybe I'm gay and I don't know what to do about it." And he said, again, "I can't help you, but if I were in your shoes, I would try very hard not to be gay." So, I didn't get very helpful responses to the clergy that I reached out to. (p. 94)

As I remember reperforming her body, I think again of the curved trunk—it moves forward, backwards, and occasionally around almost like an *extremely* slow-motion version of one of those flailing-armed inflatables that one might see outside of a car dealership. This slow movement offers her a kind of stillness that shows a certain deliberateness in her thought process; she speaks and moves much slower than I tend to, and as a result, she is a marked contrast to my own performative self. There is also an air of propriety to her—she is after all a Southern “woman of a certain age,” and she embodies a lot of the assumptions that are made

with that identification (hence, the similarities to my own grandmother). Her pacing and tone remind me of listening to someone like Dame Maggie Smith or Helen Mirren—women who still have a kind of blunt honesty about them that contrasts with the expectations of their age.

As I think of her well-kept house and her generally proper-feeling (yet not stiff) demeanor, I try to place her in my body. I acknowledge the ways that my body does not know the kind of age that hers does. I can imagine and try to imitate tension, and clothing, the weight of body parts, and the material affect of object choices, but age is something that *feels* hard to know. Size also feels like a limitation for me here—she is much smaller than I am at over six feet and around 275 pounds (at the time of interview). There is a fragility and a physical delicateness that comes with this intersection of age and size that is hard for me to imagine into my own body.

So, I return to the trunk of her body and to my grandmother, things that I feel like I *can* know. I fix the posture, ankles crossed in a proper way and hands folded delicately into my lap. I rock forward and back a few times—occasionally using my hand to support my curving torso (an example of the proxemics of how she exists within her own space). I try out pitches—higher, my natural pitch, lower—and play with affects of aging—vocal strain, softer volume, and the Southern accent that sounded like my grandmother. In rehearsal, something was still struggling to click both physically and vocally. In the anxious-and-on-book performer way, my tempos were blending together, and Joan did not have the deliberate cadence and movement style in my body that she did in her own. My outside eyes, Craig Gingrich-Philbrook—advisor and director—noted this to me, and I began to plot the tempos of each person; finally, I slowed Joan down. I am not comfortable saying that it unlocked the feeling of the aged/aging body that I was trying to stage, but recapturing the consistent and considered tempo made Joan feel more “real”

in my body. I think of the moment when her mother tells her, “You have broken my heart and shattered my faith” from the script. She stutters just before, repeating the word mother twice, slowly shifts her weight and curved her trunk back into her seat. My hand reaches behind me to steady the curved trunk that sits on the theatre block between Joan’s iterations of mother, and that moment is when I feel her age, her delicate and deliberate nature, and her vulnerability. That combination of tempo, vocal work, and deliberate slow movement in that moment of micro-performance—the movement of a hand for support—feels like Joan to me.

Shekinah

Perhaps the individual who I was most nervous to embody, as I mention above, was Shekinah. Shekinah is a Black trans woman from Birmingham, Alabama, and one of my most unique interviews. She was very image conscious—putting on hair, makeup, and nails after I arrived but before she would allow me to film. She would look to me for questions, and then deliver each answer directly to the camera. By the end of the first run of the show, Shekinah was perhaps my favorite piece to perform. When I perform Shekinah, I feel her body in two ways—the first is the physical (similar to Calvin and Leigh, her choices in presentation illuminate the imperative of passing placed upon trans individuals) and the second is emotional.

I begin by sitting, adjusting, and moving the seat closer to the audience—a proxemics choice to acknowledge the intense connection Shekinah had to the camera. In staging, we chose to forefront her relationship to the audience, to mark the ways that her interview stood out from the others. The ways that her direct address to the camera seemed to nod to the eventuality of an audience for her words (in addition to the ways in which she is used to speaking to media outlets, directly to the camera, in her role as a trans advocate who has opened a new institution in her Southern town). I smooth my hand over my thigh—an auto-tactile moment communicating

preening that she turned to many times in the interview. Within my head, I consider her body—the nails that she wore, the hair that she periodically adjusted and the weight of it, the large breast implants and the way they affect her movement and interaction in space. She stands, chest out, with her hands palm-up working alongside her breasts to frame her face as she discusses her important work as a trans advocate in the South. Her identity and her body were more obviously different than mine as opposed to some of the others, and I am reminded of a conversation I had while reading about the imperative of passing in Gayle Salamon's *Assuming a Body* (2010). Salamon points out the importance our culture places on passing for trans folk, noting that passing is a problematic burden that many trans individuals feel tension with, but they often must succumb to the imperative of passing as a mode of survival in a transphobic culture. I extend Salamon's observations to a double bind; for a trans individual, passing too well makes you a "trap"—a trans woman trying to fool men, and presenting in non-passing ways marks you as trans along with an increased risk for violence and harassment that problematically comes with that. This is particularly true for trans women of color, who are murdered in double-digit totals nearly every year including 2019 (Human Rights Campaign) and face increased odds of verbal and sexual abuse as well as domestic violence according to vawnet.org (Violence Against Trans and Non-Binary People, 2019). While on the surface the hair, nails, and breasts may seem like a shallow notion of the physicality of one particular trans body, these pieces of her body and performance remind me that it is a body with the imperative to pass and that hers is a body constantly at risk. Her nails keep my hands open—fists are impossible. Her breasts change the way I carry my back—my shoulders slink down and my weight shifts backwards in my upper body. It reminds me of my years having bass drums strapped to my chest in marching band—my feet, hips, and back countering the weight, a weight that is ever-present for Shekinah.

Finding Shekinah's body through my own is not always led by heavy reminders of violence against trans folk; Shekinah is powerful, in her own ways. She has a commanding presence and a somewhat theatrical style of movement that reminds me of her background performing as a drag queen—something she spoke about during her interviews. She references her “chosen family” of drag queens and how they led her to drag performance, and how, through that, she begins to understand herself as a trans woman. During this section, I can feel her “light up” a bit. Her shoulders relax into a near-shimmy—occasionally one folds forward to punctuate a particular idea—as I reperform this shoulder shift, I think of Jessica Rabbit or Mae West. As Shekinah, I cross the space and feel Josephine Baker through my hips. My hands are loose and so are my eyebrows, as I *feel* Shekinah's stories, suggestively raise an eyebrow at an audience member, and have this sense of Shekinah holding court in the theatre. *This, I think, is the audience that she wanted when she stared at that camera last Summer.*

I feel my vocal cords undulate along with the eyebrows during particularly humorous sections, and I can see Shekinah performing in the Quest—a club in Birmingham, Alabama that we had both frequented at different times. I imagine that she would stand in the center of the dance floor slash performance space, mirrored wall to her back, chest out, shoulder back, microphone in hand. If you have never been to a drag show, usually there is an emcee queen who introduces other queens and makes sure the night runs smoothly; I do not *know* if Shekinah was an emcee, but it seems likely that she might have been. When a queen says she is “good on the mic” it means that she is quick-witted with a commanding voice and an arsenal of bawdy, usually sexual, jokes that entertain the audience. Like most things with a value judgment (like “good on the mic”) there are scripts of what that most commonly means—a confidence in the body and movement, polished drag, but more than anything, a queen has to be *funny*. When

Shekinah *really* gets going in her narratives, I feel this body-expectation of an emcee queen enter Shekinah's body from her past; when I reperform those narratives, this queen-on-the-mic script helps me understand Shekinah's body and her past.

Shekinah ends her narrative in the show in a much different emotional space than most of her time on the stage. The narrative was chosen as a way to represent the tensions within the community, as well as show the ways that the larger LGBTQ community has shifted over time. She speaks about a time she went to what she calls a men-having-sex-with-men support group (largely because trans resources—like those that she has created—were completely unavailable). Although she did not match this demographic, she attended due to the lack of trans resources. A man asked her, “Do you still use your private part?” and she replied, “Well most definitely that’s what it’s there for.” She continues to narrate the experience:

And then the whole room got into an uproar, like, “Oh my God, like, how could you say you're a lady and you . . .” And it went crazy, and I'm just like, "No," like, I'm not gonna sit here and y'all said this was a no judgment zone, but as soon as I say something like that, just out of the scope of your closed mind, then it throws you into a fit. And y'all lookin at me some type of way, thinking that I'm interested, and y'all are just not understanding that a vagina doesn't define a trans woman. (p. 105)

The text of her narrative alone is powerful, but when placed in context of her racialized and trans/gendered body, through performance, I feel the mounting frustration; she quickly moves from narration, to amusement, to consternation, to fully-embodied righteous anger, punctuated in the full performance with a drastic drop in energy showing some amount of uncharacteristic resignation near the end of her narrative.

When I perform this section—or even when I have the embodied memories of performance through reading the narrative—I feel myself almost lose control of my tempo; I feel angry and out of place and frustrated. Shekinah’s posture is still strong, confident—chest out, back straight, tilted ever-so-slightly backwards. On stage, I am sitting again by this point—on the black box pulled close to the audience. My hands—as Shekinah’s did—become punctuated; they are no longer the loose hands of the emcee at a gay bar. As she indicated the audience and their lack of understanding, my hands hit some kind of invisible tympanic membrane, showing the rebound of a musical conductor leading an orchestra in something dark and fierce. My hands slash outward, another note of frustration rebounds in the air. Finally, a cut-off, the fingers come together, the eyes narrow, “a vagina does not define a trans woman” (p. 105). Shekinah exhales, so I exhale. The hands slowly return to the lap, a palm runs over our right thighs—preening, regaining composure. Eyebrows raise, and the moment of anger passes in the text, but reverberates through my body. I feel it in my pulse—a steady drumbeat behind my ear, and I feel it in my breath, my breast—so central a spot to Shekinah’s body—heaving up and down as I transition out of Shekinah’s body and her narrative.

When I teach introductory performance classes, I ask my students to do a quick version of ELP to emphasize all of the layers that go into interpreting literature or creating a character, but as I staged the stories of the people I interviewed, the process of placing them in dialogue with my own experience uncovered new layers of understanding for me. While I can never truly “walk in their shoes,” as the cliché goes, reconstructing the storytelling event of our interviews offers me a look into the embodied experiences of each person and the ways those bodies and experiences have shaped them and their perceptions of the world. Because of the reperformance, I have a more well-rounded understanding of the stories that shape them, and the way they re-

shape those stories. At times, I believe we may not be as cognizant about the ways our own bodies shape our stories and vice versa, but, to run with the cliché, once we try on another pair of shoes, another voice, another body, another collection of stories—the differences and similarities become sharper. This space between identification and difference is where I find the fruitful dialogue of this performance experiment in reperformance and re-embodiment. As David Graver (1997) points out, in a performance “both actor and character are present but in their own particular ways” (p. 221). This dual presence allows my body and the bodies of my interviewees to co-exist, creating an embodied conversation along the themes of identity, similarity, and difference that is central to the understanding of both self and other that I seek through queer oral history.

Re-reperforming: Moments Revisiting *Bless Our Hearts*

As I have noted before, I had multiple opportunities to perform *Bless Our Hearts*, either completely or in parts. These performance opportunities ran from the show’s first iteration at the Petit Jean Performance Festival in October of 2017 through the National Communication Association performance of the full show in November of 2018. Within the year, I performed (at least) significant sections of the show five times in clusters roughly six months apart. Heather Carver (2012) notes a conversation with performer John Anderson during which they talk about the space between him and the subject of his Chautauqua performance, William Faulkner (pp. 245-246). Anderson notes the ways in which his reperformance functions as both collaboration with Faulkner as well as interpretation of Faulkner’s writing and history. He, like Anna Deavere Smith sees much of this negotiation happening within the space between subject and performer. Carver notes that often unappreciated amount of time that goes into dedicated reperformance work, using Anderson’s work with Faulkner as an example; in conversation with this, I find time

as the site when the space between performer and subject to be the most observable.

Anderson's space is a negotiation during the interpretation and performance Faulkner; while I am not reperforming public historical figures, this notion of space still feels useful to me. It offers me a tool for conceptualizing what happens through time to my relationship with the show and the version of my interviewees that live within it between performances. As time passes, I feel the distance grow—Shekinah's hands are harder to recall with my own, Nick's vocal fry a little more difficult to pin down. In the moments of reperformance that were not split by much time (Petit Jean in mid-October 2017, to Southern Illinois University at the end of that same October, for example), the bodies and voices of each person within the show stay with me—more readily called up from the physical memory of my voice and body. This section of the chapter looks to that space, and the ways that I experienced it during the process of *Bless Our Hearts* and the subsequent time I spent re-rehearsing and reperforming the show. In order to revisit that space between referenced by Carver above, I pay attention to the process as it pertains to voice, body and space.

Voice

I sit in my office at Southern Illinois University. My interview with Akila is playing on my laptop. She sits, cross-legged on her couch in her home. Hunched over the desk in a dim office, I put a pen on a page; I draw a slow line, and pull up from the page whenever she pauses or stops talking. It's not pretty or official or something I intend anyone else to ever see, but it's useful for me. It's a diagram of sorts.

I look to my laptop, pull my fingers across the slightly worn track pad and take the cursor to my media player. I press down on the little round progress-marker and pull it back. A moment or two of silence, then Akila begins speaking again. Just above or below the first diagram

denoting rhythm, I place my pen down again. Any time her pitch shifts, I jerk the pen up or down. Now I have rhythm and pitch variance in a visual form; maybe I am the only one who will understand it, but I have it.

Finally, I take the paper in front of me. I pull Akila back through time, another pause, another beginning. I watch the diagrams as she talks, and, pen in hand, I begin to synthesize them into something that looks like sheet music. There is not a full clef bar, but a recreation of her pitch line and a mix of quarter, eighth, and half notes. The notes are dotted with staccato marks for shortness or tied to other notes when words blend together. It's not neat or really even an official way of doing this, but it helps me. I can hear the picture, and I can see her voice; I am not a strongly synesthetic person, but something about demarcating the interviews—particularly the ones that feel challenging in reperformance—helps me remember how to put the other's voice into my own.

Whenever I found myself having trouble recalling a voice and bringing it back into my performance, I would turn to two things, as shown by the narrative above. Time and time again, I was thankful that I had both audio and video recordings of each interview. They were both useful—at times I wanted to see the unification of voice and body, but at other times, I felt like I needed to pull the two apart in order to reunite them in performance. Sometimes, it felt easier to dissect a voice if I could close my eyes or focus on something else, like diagramming while listening. The other thing I would often turn to is my unofficial visualizations of the voice; I never committed to them enough to present something that would look like a musical score for the performance, although theoretically I suppose I could, and I think that would be an interesting approach, but they were never intended to be an official practice. They were simply

something I found myself turning to throughout the process in both rehearsal and (re)performance.

Perhaps, though, there is something to embracing the “unofficial” practice—something queer about those things that we as performers do to “make the thing work.” These diagrams and clefs exist in the in-between: on the edges of transcripts, on the backs of one-sided script pages. They are not necessarily a part of the way I enumerate my own practice of queer oral history, but they are useful. Like my articulations of queer oral history, they are not necessarily an official part of the oral history canon; they are, in a way, a part of methodological impurity, and they are a part, I would venture to guess, that looks familiar to many performance practitioners. If not exactly diagrams and clefs for reperformance, per se, then the compromises that we make to get something to the stage, the line that is wobbly in our memories but maybe finds new meaning in performance, the things left on a desk full of research that inform but never appear in our shows. In performance, there are often the unofficial things that are a kind of queer through their liminal involvement—the in-between of being influential but not meant for public eyes. Queer oral history, then, through the methodological impurity outlined in Chapter One, might offer us the space to acknowledge the things that we think of as unofficial as an important part of our own queer praxes.

I am in my best friend’s home—Grace from the script. My friend Alex and I are staying with her while we attend the Southern States Communication Association conference in Nashville, Tennessee in April of 2018. I am presenting a little less than half of Bless Our Hearts as part of a “Top Student Performances” panel. Despite my desires to be social and join in the conversations we were probably having about queer culture and trashy reality television, I

squirrel myself away in the corner of a closed guest bedroom. I pump Jamie’s voice through my phone and hold the speaker up to my ear. I whisper the crushed “s” sounds of her voice—“shay” or “schey” instead of say. I push the bite of my own jaw out of place a bit—kind of cattywhompus, my upper and lower teeth not quite lining up. I pause my phone and say a bit back to Jamie—what I read as a soft-buttness in her speaking style always reminds me of Jodie Foster; it’s the same crushed s of Clarice Starling interrogating Hannibal Lecter in The Silence of the Lambs. I fix my tongue loosely against my bottom front teeth and parrot my simulation of Jamie back to the recording and to myself.

As I sit here, writing, my jaw shifting into the position described in the narrative just above, I wonder why I hold my mouth like that to perform Jamie: something in our in-person interactions? In my review of the video? Maybe that’s just what it takes for me to slip into her sound. As me setting my jaw to speak as Jamie illustrates, the voice is never divorced from the body, although distinguishing between them offers neat boxes in which to put aspects of performance. When I teach introductory performance classes, I explain technique in terms of voice, body, and space, but in my own practice, the three are a dancing Venn diagram, swirling and weaving into and out of the others’ orbits. The voice is not divorced from experience either. When I have recreated *Bless Our Hearts*, I jokingly think of it as my own tour of Southern accents. In doing so, I think of my own accent(s) and, at times, lack thereof. I remember the ways—as written in Chapter Two—that my Southern accent was implicitly disciplined from my body by a culture that made it hard for me to reconcile myself with the cultural image of the South. I wonder what physicality a reperformance of my voice would entail, and I think of the ways that the voices of each of my interviewees hold the stories of how they came to sound like

themselves. I remember the tension in Calvin's bound chest and think of the ways that their identities may change their bodies, but those changed bodies change the voices that I am (re)performing as well.

Body and Space

Interestingly, despite the fact that an interviewee's body is more inherently visualized than their voice, I found it more unwieldy; a body is hard to condense into notes or charts or diagrams. There is a lot to consider—posture, breath, gestures, stature, age, ability, engagement with space, engagement with the interviewer, tensions, indicative moments, the holding of weight, and a whole host of other things. Writing descriptions of the body has its limits, as does video. There are realities of my interviewees' storytelling events that feel lost in both mediums to me. Recordings are simply artifacts built or taken from the ephemeral storytelling event of the interview that offer the hollow hope of complete recreation. They are useful, but similar to what Pineau (2000) notes about staged performance, they are a translation, and there is no adequate substitution for the embodied, in-person event. For this reason, when reacquainting myself with the bodies present in *Bless Our Hearts*, I like to approach my task with as many of these artifacts as possible.

In between shows occupying the theatre, I use my key to go in, alone. I relish these moments in the Marion Kleinau Theatre—a space that was my home for five years, and will always be home in its own way. In these moments, I don't always turn on all the lights. Maybe I just turn on the dim work lights over the stage. I take off my shoes and empty my pockets next to them—usually in the front row of the house. I lay on my back in the center, limbs reaching out as if to take in all of the sense-memory this storied performance space can offer. I breathe in, deeply, feeling my lungs expand and press my spine down towards the cold stage boards. I take a

few of these meditative breaths, remembering the shows that I have been in on this stage and the unfathomable number of shows that came before me—many from people I admire and revere. Then, I get up, fetch a block, and put it just askew of center stage. This is how most of my solo work time begins.

I walk the space, mumbling lines to myself as a kind of warm-up. This part lives here, that lives over there; this section of text lives by moving through what passes for a stage apron in this space. As noted in the script, I see the AIDS quilt, I see my father as a child in leg braces; and eventually, I get to people who are not me—narratives that are not my own. I slow down.

I think of how they were in this space before—through me, a (re)performed version of them has been on this stage. Shekinah knows her path through the house; Nick knows how it feels to lay back on a block as if it were a chaise lounge; Akila sits cross-legged until the stories move her downstage.

I track their movements, and I stop. How were her hands? Did she sit forward or lean back? I scurry off the stage into the house and pick up a set of papers from on top of my shoes. I flip through until the page with some kind of answer comes to me. Ah, yes! Her hands were palms up. Her fingers opened and closed, and her gestures avoid her breasts but frame her face. That's Shekinah! Once I have her hands back into my body, I feel myself sink into her hips. It becomes easier to smooth the dress that laid across her thighs, and I find the balance of husky femininity that exists in her voice.

The keys for each individual text that helps make up *Bless Our Hearts* feel wildly inconsistent and unpredictable. The key to rediscovering each individual and once again finding their bodies and voices is different for each interview. For some, voice seems to be the key;

Grace, for example, clicks when I revisit the ways her pitch shifts up at the end of her sentences—a vocal tic that I’ve mostly seen in Southern women. This makes sense as she speaks of reclaiming her version of the queer South through a domestic, home-making sphere. Her performance of queer femininity is itself a reclamation within her queer body. Joan becomes easier once I revisit her body—imagining her lithe, bending trunk; the sprightly crow’s feet next to her eyes; the wispy hair over her ears. This mental image of Joan helps me tap into her age—a body contextualized by queer history, a body that was kissing other women before Stonewall. Still others rely on relationality—Nick, for example, has never felt just right until I was reperforming his interview for an audience. Knowing Nick personally, he’s a bit of a social butterfly, show-off type, so the fact that he never clicks for me until there are others present makes a strange kind of sense.

Even as I have (re)performed the show in many spaces, my staging always starts at The Kleinau Theatre. That version of the show, what I consider the fully realized version, is what dominates my memory of how it should look and move. Even rehearsing in my bedroom, a hotel hallway, or my best friend’s guest room, I picture the Kleinau stage. Knowing that, though, the show was designed to be adaptable; from the outset I knew that I wanted to travel with it, so it was very important to keep the space simple and flexible. Compared to other shows that I have written and directed that rely on the structure of the space or work with the architecture present within the theatre, this one was always meant to move. Space is still important, of course, but the show truly relies on the interviews. As Shaffer, Allison, and Pelias (2015) note, the necessary elements are always text, performer, and audience (p. 188). As long as I have those things—especially the audience, as far as Nick is concerned—the show will work.

Conclusions

Rebecca Schneider (2011) writes that re-enactors often stress the smallest details of a past event, because they believe that if they reperform it “just so” that they will have “tripped the transitivity of time . . . having touched time and time having reoccurred” (p. 11). While Schneider speaks specifically of historical re-enactment, I see the similarities in my ELP undertakings. In some ways, these people are my own history as a queer Southerner; while I may not be trying to foster the reoccurrence of temporality, I hope that through reperformance, I (re)learn from these narratives and offer that opportunity to an audience. Re-enactment, recreation, and re-embodiment are interesting for the ways that the reoccurrence mimics Carver’s (2012) notion of the space between performer and subject; similarly, in reperformance there exists a space between the time of the performance and the time of the event. Whether or not I believe in a true tripped transitivity of temporality feels a little nebulous, but Stucky (1993, 1995) writes about the powerful potential of oral history performance for our students. He even notes the ways that studying another person and their daily language—as in a conversation or interview—leads to empathy and understanding. He catalogues the ways in which students notice and connect things about “the person they are acting” (1995, p. 11) in ways that connect voice, body, and experiences and allow the students a deeper understanding of the other.

Trying to create a piece of performance from a methodological practice pieced together from different commitments and trainings was fruitful; queer oral history offered this project and the narratives involved different ways to *be* than other methods might have. As a performer, I found myself surprised by the ways that I came to similar understanding of the others and myself. As a queer Southerner, I felt a real familial bond with my interviewees, a bond not dissimilar from Nick’s expression of these “being my people” (p. 112). The diverse subset of queer Southerners

painted a picture for me of a queer South that was and is at once disparate and unified.

Discussing Rebecca Schneider's book with Craig Gingrich-Philbrook via Facebook Messenger, he spoke about the difference in Schneider's look into those who re-enact war and my re-enactment of queer Southerners. It's still relevant, he told me, because "your folks are, in a way, talking about life during wartime" (C. Gingrich-Philbrook, personal communication, Sept, 2019).

That is true, in its very real way. At this political moment when they are bound to see red hats emblazoned with the bigoted "Make America Great Again," when they are all knowledgeable of the rise in hate crimes and legislative attacks against queer folk, this wartime framing seems especially salient. That said, you would not know that they are in wartime if you spoke to them; when we spoke, we laughed and smiled, and told stories; really, the interviews have been the most enjoyable part of this project. However, like many of them said to me, "The South? It's all I've ever known." They didn't see it as an exception or something worth noting, because that is just what it has always been. Perhaps their orientation to the cultural war on queer identity is the same—especially for someone like Joan: We've always been fighting, so that becomes the norm. Maybe this is a revelation of the queer oral history methodology and my role as a subject-researcher; perhaps because of my own similarity to them, I do not notice the embodied difference of an individual within this kind of battle, because I am there alongside them, and like them, it is all that my body and I have ever known.

CHAPTER 5

TRAVELIN' THRU: ENDINGS AND NEW DIRECTIONS

I am in the shower at my apartment in Tampa, Florida. It has been exactly two years since I first performed any of Bless Our Hearts for an audience. Before I get in the shower, I usually put on an album or a playlist—today I click play on an iTunes concoction of what it thinks will be my favorites. This is usually a strange mix of drag queens, Kate Bush, country music, showtunes, classic rock, folksy indie, and angry late-90's power-pop. It feels like an indelible marker of me—and because of the algorithm the music service uses, relying on repeat plays of songs, it almost always hides a little time capsule or two within the playlist. I will hear a song and it will pull me back to the time that it played over and over in my headphones—sometimes for weeks at a time.

Today, my phone pushes the wobbling cobblestone “Ohhh-oh, wooah oh ohhh, oh oh oh,” of Dolly Parton through my bathroom; her signature voice cuts through the shower sounds and “Travelin' Thru” (2006)—the song that opened every performance of Bless Our Hearts—turns my shower into its very own time machine. As Dolly sings, “Like the poor wayfarin' stranger / that they speak about in song / I'm just a weary pilgrim / tryin' to find what feels like home,” I think of how I embarked on this project at the beginning. I think of those moments between interviews, when I was driving up and down the Interstate 65 corridor, finding a new sense of belonging in every location. Lyrics like “questions I have many / answers but a few / we're here to learn / the spirit burns to find a greater truth,” now feel as if they speak about the act of research, of seeking knowledge and human empathy.

I remember standing backstage in the Marion Kleinau Theatre on opening night. As I stretch and breathe behind the black curtains, I always make a point to tell myself, “You get to

do this.” I breathe in, and try to channel all my nerves into the corresponding exhalation. My hands shake a little, and I ask them—my interviewees—to be with me. I try to think of each of their faces and the first line that I say from their interviews. Dolly rings through the theatre: “Good bye little children / Good night you handsome men / Farewell to all you ladies / And to all who knew me when . . . / And I hope I’ll see you down the road / You meant more than I knew / As I was travelin’ through.”

I think of the weight they carry, Shekinah’s body; Calvin’s tension; Joan’s papery skin and sly smile. I feel a few tears wet the corner of my eyes, but I shake them off as the song winds down. I wait a beat or two in the silence, then head into the stage lights. I am so thankful, for them, for this space, for the ability to give space and time, validity and legibility, to all of these queer narratives.

Throughout this project, for me, there was a feeling of seeking without knowing a final destination alongside an overwhelming sense of gratitude. When I was seventeen, I was told that if I was gay or queer, that because of my sexuality, I would never be successful, never be able to teach, and would probably die young. For me, this project and my presence in the academy are a kind of material retort to those claims—the kind that seemingly takes ages to actualize, but perhaps the most rewarding kind of embodied response: to succeed in the face of doubt.

I want to acknowledge that this project started with both a love for my community and a queer chip on my shoulder; both that chip—indicative of my own queer disappointment, disillusionment and rage—and my love for the LGBTQ+ community have grown through this project. As I consider the end of this project (at least for now) and I reflect on that growth, I offer this chapter as a kind of map that we can, as Dolly Parton calls us to, travel through. First, I take

stock of where I have been with this project—briefly offering an overview of this document and a reminder about where *Bless Our Hearts* started, as both a show and a dissertation. Then I want to offer some insight into what I, personally, gained from the process as well as how I see this process being useful to the wider field(s) of performance studies and qualitative person-centered research. Finally, I look to this map to see where all of this may be going—looking for my own future directions and naming some limitations of what I have done.

“Where I’ve Been”: A Review

Over time my goals for this project have shifted and evolved, but at its heart—whether I realized it or not—it was about trying to create a method for me to do performance research in a fashion that I felt served me, my audiences, and the communities that I research. *Bless Our Hearts* starts with tensions I have with my own identities, and it ends with a feeling of community fostered through a dialogue centered in homes, on the page, and then on my body and the stage. As I puzzled through these tensions with myself and the ways that I saw performance work existing, I read a lot (as graduate students do) and I made my fair share (or perhaps more than my share, depending on who you ask) of performance.

During all of this work, I found myself committed to Conquergood’s (1985) seemingly evergreen idea of dialogic performance; I have always understood it as a place that acknowledges similarity and difference as integral to understanding the unique experiences of anyone other than ourselves, and I find that to be useful in terms of negotiating ethics of representation and reperformance. Simultaneously, I found myself energized by methods that allow daily narratives to function in the humanizing and accessible ways that only they can; particularly, I was excited by Nan A. Boyd’s contributions to oral history practice—tracing a queer history of oral history with Ramirez (2012) and offering up questions about oral history

and subjectivity (2008) that lead me to want to push the boundary of what exactly a queer oral history might be. In the spirit of this process, marked and archived through this dissertation, this section offers a chapter-by-chapter review of this document.

Chapter One focuses on articulating what leads me to queer oral history—including Conquergood (1985), Boyd (2012), and others. Here, I outline what I see queer oral history as, and articulate the ways that it might be actualized. The first tenet I offer of queer oral history stems from Boyd's question about subjectivity. Tracing a history of these kinds of discussions—including the expansion of ethnography to autoethnography and Hay's (1996) articulation of subject-subject ontology—I turn to various methodologies in order to articulate my own praxis that acknowledges myself as a member of the subject pool for my study, asserting the notion of a subject-researcher as a queer one due to its own in-betweenness and both/and orientation. Then I claim the embrace of methodological impurity as the second tenet of my queer oral history practice. This impurity functions similarly to the discussion of un/official practice in Chapter Four; by embracing methodological impurity, we acknowledge the sometimes messy and productive ways different methodologies can (and in the case of queer oral history, should) co-exist and influence each other. Like welcoming (rather than hiding) those things that we think of as unofficial practice, this impurity invites us to put our methodological commitments in conversation with each in order to reach for a theoretically queerer mode of practice. While it articulates these tenets of queer oral history, Chapter One also offers a review of literature about oral history, as well as relevant pieces from both ethnography and performance literature that have influenced my work on *Bless Our Hearts*.

Chapter Two serves a more content-related function; in addition to an articulation and model of queer oral history, this project also functions itself as an oral history of queer

Southerners. As such, it felt important to note the genesis of this project in a way that explicates why I chose to focus on the intersections of sexuality and region. Chapter Two argues that region is an often-overlooked aspect within conversations about intersectionality and autoethnographically offers narratives about my own Southern upbringing as a queer person. These narratives represent a look into the tensions between Southernness and queerness that served as the kernel for this project—the tensions that guided my interview questions and the narratives that I included within the script of the eventual show. The narratives in this chapter wrestle with the idea of culturally performing queerness and Southernness while offering a depiction of how and why those tensions with the South seem so resonant for both the queer folks I interviewed and for myself.

Chapter Three begins explicitly discussing the process of creating a show based on interviews with queer Southerners. This chapter offers a discussion about and illustration of how to follow a queer oral history methodology as one converts interview transcripts into an aesthetic text meant for staged performance. As I discuss my process for scripting a queer oral history, I revisit both the ideas of methodological impurity (through the reflexive inclusion of autoethnography, for example) and subjectivity (by placing emphasis on the aforementioned self-inclusion and the way that may be used to facilitate dialogic moments of performance). I offer a discussion about the acts of translation that constitute this movement from interview to script; explicate the choices I made in terms of coding, scripting, representing interviewees on the page, and including my own narratives; and finally offer the complete script of *Bless Our Hearts* as a model for what one version queer oral history might look like.

Then, Chapter Four turns from the page to the body, offering a discussion about the practice and ethics of re-staging interviewees within this queer oral history project. I broadly

categorize tense moments of staging queer oral history into challenges and choices.

Foregrounding the possibilities for dialogic performance (between performer, interviewee/text, and audience), I reflect on the ways that my articulations of queer oral history led me to consider staging a diverse set of queer Southerners through my own body. I use five of the queer Southerners who appear in the show as examples of the challenges and considerations I faced while attempting to restage people who were both similar to and different from me. Finally, I offer a brief discussion of the ways this reperformance of their narratives has changed over time, possibly altering the ways that I consider each individual as I gain insight from new repetitions.

Finally, this chapter is meant to serve as a summary, a reflection, and a directive, offering an overview of what *Bless Our Hearts* has shown me about queer oral history as well as some suppositions about where queer oral history might go from here.

“As I’m Travelin’ Through”: Reflections and Contributions

Repetition seems to be an endless source of theorization for the field of performance studies. Performance is, in some ways, inherently repetitive—rehearsal is an attempt to drill something into a final product through repetition. Shows themselves happen over and over again. Performances travel to conferences, festivals, and other schools—a repetition across time and in new and different spaces. Repetition can be an attempt to regain something as it was, or an echo of what came before, or simply a new iteration—a set piece changes, a prop is lost, and exact replication is no longer possible. Repetition, for the performer, is known—almost a way of being—and it is evocative for us. Repetition is a way of storyliving—what Allison (2018b) calls “the ability to exist narratively across time;” it offers us space to find agency and change—as in Pineau’s (1995) discussion of the repetition of rehearsal. Additionally, as Shaffer (2019) reminds us in her “Page to Stage” panel presentation on re-staging the primordial horror classic, *The*

Creature from the Black Lagoon, repetition “disturbs time as past and present exist simultaneously.” She goes further, to remind us that the changes possible within each repetition offer us “an invitation to another futurity” (2019).

Reperforming narratives that are not the performer’s own is both a repetition and a unique event. As I recreate my own story about sitting in a trailer in Athens, Alabama watching a lesbian eat a dog biscuit, I see the trailer—I *know* it, because I was there; it’s my narrative. Conversely, as I tell the narrative about Nick’s first pride, I can imagine the bedroom floor and the hastily drawn protest signs, but I do not *know* them in the same way. However, each time I recreate Nick’s narrative, it feels like I know it a little bit better; his friend Cathy holds an image in my head; I see the pick-up truck he references, and I can imagine the men he thinks of when he calls the gay community a meat market. As I repeat the reperformance, it exists narratively across time, lasts longer in my own embodied memory, and offers new layers of knowing. Repetition changes things, makes them different. In some odd way characteristic of performance, it makes truths about human being feel more tangible, even when we know they are not—at least not in the strictly physical sense. For me, part of the academic value of *Bless Our Hearts* is the way that queer oral history allows space for dialogue through both creation and performance, but also through repetition. This repetition exists in the reperformance itself and in the act of rehearsing these reformed narratives, but I am not sure that I conceived of it in quite the way that I do now (near the end of this project) back at the beginning, before I moved the show to different venues across time. This repetition across temporal space seems to highlight the things that we (sometimes unknowingly) gain through repetitions of reperformance and rehearsal that occur within a more set period of time. This longer-form repetition allowed me to more readily observe the ways that the embodied realities of participants stayed with/in my body, and the

ways that their narratives lived in my mind, called forth at various connecting points in my own life. These are things that did happen when I embarked on my month of working on the show for its initial full run in the Kleinau Theatre, but they seemed more resonant when I had the opportunity to revisit it months later. Reperformance—both of narratives and of an aesthetically crafted show—remind me that repetition is something intrinsic to many modes of performance, but it is something that never feels *quite* the same (at least to me) in other modes of academic inquiry.

In terms of broader contributions of this dissertation, first and foremost is my articulation of queer oral history. Queer oral history can go in many directions from where I start with it, based upon the interests, identities, and methodological background of anyone who chooses to take it up as a practice. While it feels like oral history is a bit out of fashion in favor of things like ethnography in this particular moment, I believe that the implications and goals of queer oral history are able to transcend the specific methodology, and really become more about how we engage in person-centered research practices. The questions about dialogue and subjectivity that are central to my experiments with queer oral history are questions that, in some form or another, should guide anyone working qualitatively with human subjects. These parts of my inquiry form a solid ethical base that forces the subject-researcher to think in deep ways about the ethics of engaging with the other as well as the ethics of their own role in their research practices.

Ultimately, though, *Bless Our Hearts* aims to contribute to two specific areas: queer/identity studies and performance studies. From my queer studies perspective, it is my hope that intersectional scholars will see the narratives of queer Southerners as valuable and take up my call that regions is an oft-overlooked aspect of our intersectional identities that comes preloaded with presumptions and historical baggage, just as other identity markers do. The script

of the show itself serves as an archive of one version of the queer South at one moment in time, and the collection of narratives, to me at least, feels diverse, resonant, and important. I hope others appreciate them for the value that they have.

In terms of performance studies, I have a few hopes for the contribution of this dissertation. Frankly, I hope to see more people engaging in (re)performance work; since I have joined the field I have only seen one other full-length show that relied on explicit methods of reperformance. Methods of reperformance—whether ethnography, oral history, everyday life performance, or some combination thereof—can offer such interesting and dynamic ways of knowing and engaging with the questions of interpretation and staging that are central to our field, and I wish they made more of an appearance today. Beyond that, which may only amount to my own wish, this dissertation has sought to nuance the ways that we think of oral history, introducing queer oral history as a wrinkle in oral history as a performance methodology. Some may argue that the work of E. Patrick Johnson (2010) or Anna Deavere Smith (1994) constitute, at least in part, a queer oral history; however, I would contend that the orientation towards queer oral history is a large part of the method that precludes us from retroactively re-naming the work of others. A commitment to dialogue and decentralizing the dichotomy of subject and researcher are foundational to my articulation of queer oral history, and thus, unless we know Smith's and Johnson's commitments as they embark on their projects, we cannot, in the spirit of queer oral history, claim their work as an example (though influential it may be).

Ultimately, this show and this project served as an incubator of sorts, through which I thought about and theorized queer oral history. Queer oral history has a wealth of influences (as noted throughout this document, but particularly in Chapter One), and for me serves to illuminate many of the values of doing qualitative, person-based, performance inquiry. By placing

considerations of other methods in conversation with each other—the reflexivity of autoethnography, the reperformance of oral history and ethnographic performance, the empathy and engagement of the other from traditions of oral interpretation—queer oral history strives to maximize our ability to understand similarity and difference through creating dialogue both through text and the body. As Conquergood (1985) reminds us to reach for “experiential insight,” queer oral history as a method is focused on the commitments that it asks its practitioners to embrace: dialogue with the other, reflexively questioning the role of subjectivity, and embracing methodological impurity in practice. Through these commitments, queer oral history is a method that holds critical potential for creating research that focuses on understanding and empathy as a way to archive a temporally bound collection of individuals.

“Where I’m Goin’”: Limitations and Future Directions

In acknowledging the limitations of my study and my articulations of queer oral history, I feel the need to note that I see this as a starting point. In no way is *Bless Our Hearts* indicative of all that queer oral history can be nor is it the end-all and be-all example of what a queer oral history might look like. *Bless Our Hearts* is one model of what a queer oral history might be, and this dissertation serves as a suggestive map of what it might look like to practice queer oral history as a method. Additionally, despite the audience-friendly title, I want to stress that the oral history of *Bless Our Hearts* is not a monolithic and all-consuming portrait of queer folk in the South. The participant pool is constructed primarily of communities where I had some form of connection, primarily along the I-65 corridor from Nashville to Birmingham. The interviews are bound by the time in which they took place, the locations the interviewees are from, and what they were willing to share with me—a white, male-read, queer friend/acquaintance/stranger (dependent upon the interview). Additionally, a limitation of my interview pool and the

“snowball” method of collecting interviews I used is that, by and large, my interviewees were very well educated when compared to the general population. Among thirteen total interviewees, at least seven of them were working on an advanced degree (beyond a Bachelor’s degree); additionally, all but maybe two of them have attended at least some college. While I achieved diversity in many ways—race, gender identity, sexuality, current class, age—education level functions as one limitation that defines what *Bless Our Hearts* is able to show about this version of queerness in the South.

Alongside these acknowledgements, it remains in the spirit of queer oral history to note that my role and my identity are a distinct influence on this project; while I attempt to reflexively take account of myself throughout the process, questioning subjectivity and trying to decentralize, when possible, my role as researcher into a role as subject-researcher, truly destabilizing the role of researcher is difficult if not impossible. Even as I practice reflexivity and add my own narratives alongside those of my interviewees, I still have a different form of control over the material than they do—not only my narratives, but also the narratives they have shared with me.

It is also worth noting that this project never set out to be or claimed to be a holistic view of the queer South; it was always meant to meet two goals. First, I wanted to create a performance that explored whether or not other people felt the same tensions that I explain in Chapter Two along the intersections of queer and Southern identity. Second, I wanted to see in which ways I could push qualitative people-based performance methodologies into a queerer theoretical space. I feel that *Bless Our Hearts* and queer oral history achieve those goals, respectively and together, but I want to reiterate that in no way should this be viewed as the only or definitive way to practice queer oral history. By its very nature as queer—shifting, liminal,

and finding the potential in the in-between—it should resist neat definition, and the only way to breathe that life into it is to practice it, experiment with it, and to let it live through the work.

The future of queer oral history itself brings me to the directions that I might like to take with it and see others take with it going forward. Throughout this project, I have often wondered what queer oral history might look like as the subject-researcher had increasingly less in common with the interviewees—at least on the surface level; e.g. what would *Bless Our Hearts* be if I was interviewing straight-identified folks? Or if I wasn't queer? Or if I was not, myself, a Southerner? While I do not have a neat and clean answer for those kinds of questions—and I would likely have to undergo another entire project to approach them—I do not think that one must readily identify with the population of the study in order to meet the tenets of queer oral history that I have laid out. While it may make some aspects of finding the dialogue easier in ways, I think to shirk the potentialities of a queer oral history wherein the subject-researcher does not readily fit into the population of the study is to engage in a form of skeptic's cop-out. I acknowledge that in order to function as a subject-researcher when one does not readily meet the requirements of the subject pool may seem difficult, but I believe with the right approach to reflexivity and the right framing goals for the study, to approach this kind of research from the place of queer oral history is possible and could prove valuable.

To that end, I would like to revisit queer oral history as a method in the future; frankly I have found *Bless Our Hearts* to be too fruitful in a multitude of ways not to further engage with this work. In terms of writing, I do not feel that I am done with *Bless Our Hearts* quite yet—I would like to create a methods essay outlining queer oral history from this document, and I would like to work with the transcripts of the interviews in order to create a textual oral history that highlights narratives that are not included in the show. Beyond that, I have thought about

several performance projects that use queer oral history in the future. Beginning to dip my toes into the concerns of a subject-researcher who does not match the study's population (outlined above), I would like to combine queer oral history with my interest in drag cultures, crafting an oral history of drag performers, and perhaps reperforming them both "in drag" and "out" to see the ways in which this overtly marked gender performance influences the embodied realities of the storytelling event of the interview.

Ultimately, nothing would make me happier than to see other practitioners creating works of queer oral history. As I mentioned above, it is hard for queer oral history to live into its own queerness until multiple voices are breathing life into it, allowing it to become in a multitude of ways. *Bless Our Hearts* is one example—complete with a model and a map of my process for suggestion—but I am truly energized when I think of the ways in which other people can change what queer oral history has been. Because of its commitments to methodological impurity, queer oral history is rife with space for experimentation; anyone with different methodological training that mine might create a different set of methods that (re)mold and (re)shape (queer) oral history as that person seeks the best way to find empathy and dialogue for them, their studied population, and the queer oral history that they want to create.

"I Hope I See You Down the Road": Final Thoughts

Grace. Jamie. Joan. Akila. Calvin. Austin. Shekinah. Leigh. Nick. I do not feel like I am done with *Bless Our Hearts*, the queer oral history I have created. I am unsure of what this means Perhaps it means restaging the show, reperforming the bodies and the narratives that I have spent so much time with. Maybe it does not mean that. *How could I be done with it, I think, when so often I feel their bodies and their stories within my own?* A wrist flourish or a reference to a tragic queer brings shades of Nick. I remember Joan alongside memories of my

grandmother, feel my face shift into something like theirs, and wonder what Joan was doing at various moments in my grandmother's life; how were they alike? How were they different?

When I feel my own tensions with increasingly commercialized Pride celebrations, I feel Leigh's anxiety creep into my trunk and become stiff and regimented—if only for a moment. The truth is I cannot be done with *Bless Our Hearts*—deep embodied dialogue has a way of staying with us, of sticking to our ribs (to borrow a food-related cliché); I also cannot be done with *Bless Our Hearts* because as the dialogue at the center of this queer oral history taught me, in many ways—and across differences—their reality is my reality, their queer South is my queer South.

After I first partially came out as a teen, there have been two specific cultural moments that filled me with a sense of dread for the systemic realities of being a queer person; this is not to say that other moments do not exist—bullying, microaggressions, fearing violence in certain space—but two moments really marked, for me, a visceral queer anxiety. The first was the Pulse shooting—an act of mass violence that made me question whether I would ever feel safe partaking in queer communities again. The second was the 2016 U.S. presidential election, a moment that cast fear and anxiety on many marginalized individuals of different identities. The fact that these are the two moments that stand out to me the most is likely influenced by time (I first came out around 2006 as a young teen, not necessarily the savviest about current events), and privilege (as a queer white person who is likely always read as male, I have the privilege of being shielded from a lot). Those moments stand out to me; like many people when speaking of 9/11, I know where I was when I heard the news; I remember the feelings and the movements of those moments. The fact that these are the two moments that stand out to me is likely also a survival mechanism; if I had warranted, drastic reactions like these to every piece of news that disparaged or endangered queer folk, I am not sure that I would be able to function in our world.

My specific part of the world is also pretty damn queer—I have a lot of queer friends and colleagues and am lucky enough to work in an academic industry where my queerness has often felt celebrated; I acknowledge that this is not the experience of everyone, but I note it in order to say that queerness—its celebrations, anxieties, and realities—are a daily endeavor for me.

Sometimes, as a result of this feeling, my queer research, like *Bless Our Hearts* can, to me, feel as if it is being perceived as mundane, not important, not cutting-edge and socially relevant like much of the work that I am surrounded by in the academy. When I have those feelings, I think back to those moments, Pulse and the election, moments marked by sadness, disillusionment, and an embodied shaking rage that feels much like what I feel when I perform Shekinah (as noted in Chapter Four). I also think of my queer community: the friends, the colleagues, and the people who co-create *Bless Our Hearts* with me. My work is for me, as everyone's is in some way, but it is also for them. As I have developed as a scholar my guiding research question has been, "In what ways can I use aesthetic, narrative, and performative methods to make queer lives more legible to a wider audience?". I mean that to offer opportunities for humanization and understanding, to create empathy not just between my diverse queer community and myself, but to offer that empathy to a larger audience through writing and performing. I hope, and I think, *Bless Our Hearts* has accomplished that in some measure, and I look forward to seeing the ways that queer oral history can continue to do the work of fostering empathy and understanding for my community and whichever diverse communities to which other researchers might apply it.

I take a step forward. I unbutton a button on my spring-green shirt. I speak a bit, to an audience I cannot see past the bright stage lights. After a pause, I speak again. I unbutton two

more buttons, and step forward. Now, past the line of the lights, I see faces—some that I know and others that I do not. Some, I know to be queer, and others I know do not identify in that way. Just like the community within Bless Our Hearts, the audience is diverse. In hindsight, the audiences blend together, creating a mosaic in my mind—a different kind of community, comprised of audiences bearing witness to this story; though this community continues to persist in my mind, it is ephemeral—disbanded once the threshold to the performance space is crossed. I finish unbuttoning my shirt on the final lines. I open the button down to reveal the screen-printed phrase: Y’ALL MEANS ALL. Mama Cass comes over the theatre speakers this time, asking us all to “Make your own kind of music.” The tide of houselights washes the temporary community into the lobby, breaking up the collective that existed only moments before. I hope, like me, that they are not done with Bless Our Hearts; I hope they carry stories with them, that they remember Joan, and Shekinah, and Grace and Jamie, and all of the people that they heard from in that theatre. Still, though, my mind always returns to the queer people who shared their stories with me. After all, these are my people, and it is us against the world.

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APPENDIX A

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS

Group 1: Self Identification

Will you please start by telling me a bit about yourself?

What kind of context would you want someone to know before you told them your life story?

What do you think are your own defining characteristics?

Group 2: Southern Identity

Where are you from? And where do you live now?

Do you self-identify as Southern?

What makes you proudest or most concerned about your Southern identity?

How do you define the South? How would you explain Southern Culture?

What is an experience that made you really feel aligned with your Southern identity?

Group 3: Queer Identity

When did you realize or acknowledge that you may identify within the LGBTQ+ community?

What does it mean, for you, to identify within the LGBTQ+ community?

What is an experience that made you feel aligned with your queer identity?

Group 4: Tensions between the Queer and the Southern

Do you think that it is or was more/less difficult being a member of the queer community in the South?

At what times of in what spaces do you feel safe and/or at home in the South? When do you feel less “at home”?

If you identify religion as integral to Southern culture, how does that inform your self-identification as a queer Southerner?

Have you ever had an experience where being Southern felt harder because you were queer-identified? An experience where being queer was harder because you were Southern?

Group 5: Reconciliation between the Queer and the Southern

How have you come to understand these two aspects of your identity in relation to each other?

Obviously, we exist with both parts of us at the same time—they co-exist; is there anything (an experience, a practice, etc.) that has made that dual presence easier to understand or to make sense of for you?

Are there any experiences that you feel define you as both a member of the LGBTQ community and a Southerner? If you feel that your LGBTQ-related experiences and your Southern identities remain separate, why do you think that is?

What kinds of representations of this identity intersection do you feel have been available to you as a queer Southerner? For example, characters in popular culture, relatives or acquaintances from your own life?

What are the places that feel like “home” to you as a Queer Southerner?

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