

**“Knoxville is Home Because I Have Made it That Way”:
Drag Family and the Politics of Joy in Knoxville, Tennessee**

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Thank you to the House of Commitment for making all this possible. Thank you to my advisor, Dr. LaToya Eaves, for always encouraging and inspiring me. Thank you to my wife and friends for filling my life with love and joy.

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I uncover narratives of joy and love for a queer and trans drag family in Knoxville, Tennessee. Considered to be in a region that is openly hostile towards queer folk, I use documentary filmmaking to see how a family trans drag entertainers create queer space for themselves and others in the South. Current legislature is slashing rights for queer folk in Tennessee, directly affecting the lives and wellness of queer and trans people, including the people in this film. Through interviews I discover how this drag family, *The House of Commitment*, bands together to navigate their conservative surroundings, and form deep connections of home. Centered around their drag mother Daphne, the group works as a team to make sure everyone's needs are met. I explore what allowed each of them to do drag, what led them to become a part of their families, and what inspired them to transition. The strength, resilience, and joy of the family can be seen throughout my film, and their experiences in the South being trans drag entertainers are detailed in my thesis.

Link to Film: <https://youtu.be/moyWHSHOYzg>

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL INFORMATION

Introduction

Encompassed by all the makeups of his art, Mel Box looks into the camera ready to introduce himself, illuminated by early sunlight casting a beautiful yellow ray in from the stained-glass window. Surrounded by stylized wigs, countless pieces of makeup, and idle sewing machines waiting for the next project; he describes in his own words, where is home. “Knoxville is home because I’ve made it that way,” he proclaims, exuding pride and joy from every pore. “I finally realized that I have all of the things here in Knoxville that I need to succeed and be happy.”

The project examines how transgender drag entertainers in Knoxville, Tennessee, derive joy, hope, and success in a location that is outwardly hostile towards their existence. When I say drag entertainers, I mean people who perform drag for a public audience. I explain how this drag family’s lives and performances in Knoxville go far beyond what is considered to be socially acceptable for the South and what it allows queer performers to achieve in a conservative, oppressive region. I explore the dynamics of a drag family, a group consisting of drag performers that band together to form a supportive, chosen family. I find out what being a part of a drag family grants an individual and what it allows them to do as far as creating queer space in a majority conservative landscape. Through documentary filmmaking, I capture their thoughts and feelings on the political attacks they are facing in Tennessee and show how these pieces of legislation are affecting their art, safety, and mental well-being.

Significance of Study

The scope of this thesis is Knoxville, Tennessee. The city of Knoxville has a checkered history with violence towards the LGBTQ community. Queer people in this city have experienced hate crimes, discrimination, and violence as a result of their sexuality and or gender identity. Not only have queer people in Knoxville faced citywide hate, but also continue to endure discriminatory policy enactments from the state of Tennessee. Tennessee is one of eight states in the United States that has a negative LGBTQ equality score. Meaning that not only are there not protections or laws for equality, but there are policies working against LGBTQ equality. Some of these harmful laws include, HB3 and SB228, the law banning transgender students from participating in sports outside of their gender at birth, requiring a birth certificate be shown to prove their “real” gender. HB1182 and SB1224 have also been passed which requires businesses that allow people to use restrooms according to their gender identity to post an offensive warning at the entrance of the building and bathrooms (Campaign for Southern Equality, 2021). Recently, in Knoxville, drag entertainers have also faced backlash from the county government, in particular, Knox County mayor, Glenn Jacobs. Who posted on his personal, yet public-facing twitter account:

“Over the past couple days, my office has been flooded with calls concerning all-ages drag shows. Let me be clear: I don't care what consenting adults do, but leave kids out of it. As Mayor, I will do everything I can to ensure these events

don't happen on Knox County property” (Jacobs, G. [@GlennJacobsTN], 2022, Nov. 1).

Jacobs and his following are positioning drag performers as predators of children. This view has gained political support and Tennessee recently legislated how drag establishments are treated by the law, upholding similar rules of strip clubs, even though clear distinctions are made and advertised when adult content is being performed. § 7-51-14 in Tennessee, the state law which oversees how adult-oriented establishments can operate. The law says topless dancers, go-go dancers, exotic dancers, strippers, male or female impersonators, or similar entertainers at adult venues cannot perform within 1,000 feet of a church, childcare facility, school, park, family recreation center or home (Chris Salvemini, Katelyn Keenehan, 10NEWS). The enforcement of these laws resulted in numerous all-ages drag events to be canceled and shut down in Knox County. Tennessee is the first state in the country to ban drag. Through my conversations held with drag entertainers and transgender individuals, the queer community in Knoxville feels under attack.

This research is important because it shows how transgender individuals survive and resist in an area where they are openly not accepted. This research will show how queer space and queer family can be created through drag and can give queer people the access to express themselves and be celebrated for their individualized expression of gender, in an area where being different/queer can incite violence. Researching and discussing this topic will hopefully illuminate the ways in which drag allows queer space

to occur, exist, and be made, in the South. I chose Knoxville, Tennessee because it is increasingly conservative leaning, based on election results and outcomes, yet these queer spaces are still occurring and thriving, pushing back on the anti LGBTQ values that conservatives hold.

Definitions

Drag families: A cluster of drag queens (entertainers) who socialize, support, and educate each other. A drag family is often led by a drag mother who is a more seasoned, experienced, and skilled drag queen (entertainer) (Alvarez, 2022).

HRT: Hormone replacement therapy.

Genderqueer drag performers/entertainers: A trans or non-binary person performing drag that subverts gender normalcy.

Mainstream drag: Drag as seen on RuPaul's Drag Race. Usually cis men dressing up as exaggerated, hyperfeminine women.

Non-binary: *Adjective*. A person whose gender identity does not conform to the gender binary, which is the erroneous idea that only two distinct and opposite genders exist, male and female. In reality, many genders exist (It Gets Better Project, n.d.).

Popular drag: A person who performs drag as a hyperfeminine Queen or a masculine King.

Drag Queen: Someone who dresses as or impersonates a woman for entertainment and show purposes (RuPaul's Drag Race Dictionary, n.d.).

Drag King: Someone who dresses as or impersonates a man for entertainment and show purposes (RuPaul's Drag Race Dictionary, n.d.).

Queer: *Adjective*. In a very basic sense, anyone who is not heterosexual and/or cisgender. In the past, queer was a negative or pejorative term for people who are gay, and thus it is sometimes disliked. But the term is increasingly being used to describe all identities and politics that go against normative beliefs. As such, the term is valued by many LGBTQ+ people for its defiance and by others who find it to be an appropriate term to describe their more fluid identities (It Gets Better Project, n.d.).

Transgender: *Adjective*. Someone whose gender identity differs from the one that was assigned to them at birth. Many transgender people identify as either male or female, while others may see transgender as an umbrella term and identify as gender nonconforming or queer. How transgender people choose to express their gender is individualistic, as is their transition (It Gets Better Project, n.d.).

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the rewards that come along with performing drag in a high-risk area (the South)? What has drag allowed these trans individuals to explore about themselves and their world around them?

For this question I will be looking to see what performing drag means and gives performers in Knoxville. I want to know what risk factors they face from doing drag in a region that often disallows difference from normativity, and what doing drag rewards them. I want to know how they feel about performing drag after the anti-drag bill is put into place.

RQ2: Is Knoxville, Tennessee a hostile landscape for Queer people? And are Queer folk afforded the opportunities to thrive here?

From this question, I am trying to find what makes the Knoxville drag scene unique. I am also trying to figure out how these alternative queer spaces take place. I want to learn how these performers have the ability to access these spaces to express themselves, what are their motivations, and what lived experiences make them who they are.

RQ3: What does being in a drag family do for drag entertainers? How do these families form and why do they form?

With this question, I am looking to see what being a part of a drag family gives the entertainer. I want to know in what ways their family has influenced their drag and how it has influenced their life. I want to know what the support feels like and what it allows them to do that they were not able to do before having a drag family.

RQ4: How is the Tennessee anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation affecting transgender drag entertainers in Knoxville?

When asking this question, I want to find out how the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation is affecting the transgender individuals who do drag that I am filming. I want to know all of the effects that these bans and laws are having on some of the queer people in Knoxville.

The House of Commitment

The thesis is centered on a drag family in Knoxville, Tennessee. Many of which live together under one roof. Daphne, the house mother, has been able to find and secure housing for her and her drag children Eli and Phoenix. Throughout my time talking with her, I found that Daphne is always “bottom-lining” for her drag children. Meaning, Daphne is doing everything it takes to make sure her drag children are taken care of and put in positions to thrive. Daphne is there for her drag children in every sense. Eli was the first drag child of Daphne out of my participants. He began his drag family journey by being close friends with Daphne. But once he decided to do drag, Daphne took on more of a mentoring and nurturing role with Eli. Phoenix was the next in line in the House of Commitment. Through her drag family, she was able to leave a place of violence and enter into a home filled with love and support. Phoenix was the youngest participant at 22, and says being a part of the House of Commitment has granted her the ability to learn many life lessons and helped her improve her artform. Lastly, the newest member of the House of Commitment is Azelia. Azelia was born and raised in Germany and came to the United States a couple years ago. Although she does not live in the physical home of the House of Commitment, she has been welcomed into a very extensive network of queer people. She was able to meet Daphne on a digital queer space and the two have been

close ever since. Azelia spends most of her time in Daphne, Eli, and Phoenix's home and feels just as a part of the family as everyone else. Together the four work together to survive and thrive in the southern city of Knoxville.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I provide an overview of literature relevant to the project. I draw on literature that falls under two broad themes: 1) Queer placemaking and 2) Media and film as queer space(s).

The Creation of Queer Space in the South

“One cannot fully grasp American politics without understanding the extent to which normative Christianity dictates the political, social, and sexual agenda. The comfortable well-established home of that conservative Christianity is the American South.

Confederate patriarchy, and white capitalism provide friendship and a neighborly helping hand. And in this genteel atmosphere, gender/identity clarity perpetuates the ease with which they yield power over all they survey.

Gender/sexual complexities are unwelcome here. And anyone caught giving them a home, will be punished” (Wilson 1999, p. 165).

The South is a dangerous to place to be when queer or genderqueer. As geographer LaToya Eaves (2017) notes, “The South’s cultural identity has remained fixated on a set of historical moments and iconography, such as the pre-abolition South and its secession movement, the role of the South in the Civil War, deep-fried and sugared foodscapes, widespread persistent poverty, and widespread Christian religiosity, to name a few” (p. 82). And yet, queer joy can still be found here. Queer success and happiness are still living here. While living in an environment with longstanding existing

hostility towards queer people, queer people continue to resist these attitudes and make their lives in the South. Because, “assuming that queer people want to run for the big cities in the north or on the West Coast as soon as they have the opportunity denies the existence of rich queer narratives in Southern states and denies the intersection of Southern and queer identities” (Eaves 2017).

In my work, I examine how queer spaces can be made in the southern city of Knoxville, Tennessee. I’ve chosen this city as it is the city where I experienced my own queer renaissance. My experiences have been varied, but mostly positive, as I have been able to cultivate my own sense of queer community and family. In many ways, I believe that Knoxville’s queer community is a lot like Taylor and Rupp’s study of 801 Cabaret in Key West. They write,

“Summing up the hopes and dreams of the drag queens, a young gay man with theatrical ambitions explained that the show “signifies for me... that we have these differences but here we are all together within this small space.

Communing, interacting, being entertained, having a good time and everything is going well... and I think the idea being to make some sort of, like, utopia or this is the way it could be. Once we all leave this bar, if we can all see four different people that are different and commune together, or at least respect each other, then when we leave this bar, wouldn’t the world be a little bit better place?”

(Taylor and Rupp 2018, pg 17).

Through my research, I am able to see how others achieve this belonging through the performance of drag and the cultivation of a drag family in Knoxville. My personal

experience with drag has always been as an observer. And as an observer, I have been allowed to question my own stance on gender and sexuality. Further, because of these queer spaces being made for drag performance, I have been able to perform queerness myself. These experiences have brought me more happiness and joy in Knoxville, Tennessee, than anywhere else I have lived or been.

In this thesis, I seek to understand what it takes for genderqueer drag entertainers to experience their own versions of joy. How are they making queer space through their drag for joy to be felt by them and others? How are they making queer space in their everyday homes? I know that my research will contribute to queer geographies because I show how queer southerners survive and thrive while actively having to resist the space they are in, particularly through drag families and drag performance. There are many things to be gained from attending and performing in a drag show as a queer person. As anthropologist and gender studies scholar Marlon Bailey (2013) argues, “Gender self-fashioning is constituted by a form of communal performance labor whereby the community creates, recognizes, and confers legitimacy on particular performance of gender and sexual identity” (p. 45). In drag performances, the entertainer’s space has been cultivated by the queer community, and in this space, they are able to not only explore gender themselves, but let those that watch feel seen and validated.

I argue that the alternative styles of drag, and the prominent transgender drag entertainers here in Knoxville cause a further queering of the standard social idea of the gender binary, by resisting normativity and creating new possibilities. In the same way that “lesbians and gay men resist normativity and challenge the hegemonic

heterosexualization of home through their domestic practices” (Barrett, 2015, 194), the widely accepted idea that there are only two genders, male and female, are directly challenged through the androgynously alternative drag presentations and performance styles of the drag performers in Knoxville. This can be seen with drag queens donning full bushy beards, untucked packages, and other various acts of gender bending, aligning with Bailey’s assertion that “Members create, sustain, and affirm forms of presentation and performance in the community” (Bailey 2013, p. 47). The practices of genderqueer drag expression and performance not only allows the performer to explore different possibilities of their own self-identity but also furthers the queering of Knoxville by creating space for other queer folk to feel comfortable to do the same.

In the case of Knoxville’s drag scene, I believe the gender queer drag performers are gender revolutionaries. Taylor and Rupp (2004) describe gender revolutionaries in this way: “Through their self-presentations and performances, they enact a collective identity that calls attention to the artificiality of gender and sexual binaries. In that sense, they are indeed gender revolutionaries” (p. 130). The collective identity of the queer performers in Knoxville is one of difference. Through these differences, comes the active resistance through drag performance, that challenges the set societal gender binaries, and becomes a collective creation of a queer space for survival.

Using Film and Media to Analyze Queer Space

Through documentary filmmaking, I explore the complex nature of being transgender in the South and how queer spaces and familial units can be made through

drag that exude queer joy. As Bernardo argues, “Even though in the last years the tone of LGBT films has been shifting to a more hopeful light, it’s still quite permanent that despite the different sexualities, ages, regions, in the end they all shared something in common: an overwhelmingly sad ending” (2021, p. 37). In my research, I aim to push back on these commonly shown negative stories and show positive ones that other queer people can derive hope from. I cover the negative as well, but I think highlighting the positive stories here is incredibly important in adding to the rich southern queer narratives.

When I began to think about how queer space can be created through drag, I wanted to clarify what the definition of queer space means. I started my research with Jason Bryant’s 2015 article, *The Meaning of Queer Home*. In Bryant’s introduction, he compares the writings of Audre Lorde and Leslie Feinberg, and how the two authors differ in perspective on the idea of queer home.

“On the one hand, queering the home involves deconstructing home ideology as a set of particular, heteronormative social constructs that disallow wider conceptual possibilities for space and sexualities. On the other hand, queering the home means guaranteeing that queers have access to real-world spaces of shelter and comfort. Thus, queering the home stretches and scrambles the home category (“dyke bar as home,” “Black lesbian sisterhood as home,” “body as home”) while insisting upon self-defined, material structures of protection and comfort for queers” (Bryant, 2015, p. 262).

In my research, I use a bit of both perspectives to explain how queer space is made in Knoxville through drag. I think it is possible to have feelings of home and not being in a physical home, but I also believe the physicality and safety of a home are also important. How I see this existing together is in actions and opinions of the drag family I studied. Azelia, does not live in the physical home of the House of Commitment, but still feels that her drag family is home to her. Whereas the physical home that Eli, Daphne, and Phoenix live in were essential to their safety, especially for Phoenix. For her, she was able to escape the violence she was facing in her biological family's home and enter a safe and secure home, and that along with her relationships with her other drag family members is what made it feel like home to her.

In contrast to the usual drag narrative shown on RuPaul's drag race on television, I analyze how the drag scene in Knoxville deconstructs the socially accepted and enforced gender binary that Southern culture and popular drag representation in media pushes on queer folk. I also reflect on how the physicality of a family unit or home can grant a queer person access to alternative gender expression and education that influence a queer person's ability to survive in a place of oppression, how these queer spaces can become home to queer people when they are rejected by their biological family, and how they can create familial like connections with others within these spaces.

In Olivier Vallerand's article, *Home Is the Place We All Share*, he cites queer theorist Judith Butler's concept of performativity of gender. Butler's argument is that gender is created through sustained social performances, through speech and corporeal

acts, most often unconsciously (Vallerand, 2013, p. 65). Vallerand goes on to explain how queer theory has since expanded on this concept of gender. Pushing for the deconstruction of the idea that gender is just an essential part of someone's identity. That instead gender should be composed of the formation of repetitive actions of someone's self-identification. I propose that performance in drag gives an individual the space to experiment and develop new possibilities of gender that are not within the norms of society. Possibly opening doors for queer people in the South, that were previously unattainable, to find self-discovery and exploration.

When I speak about "popular drag" and how Knoxville's drag scene often subverts the gender roles that are reinforced in popular drag in media, I am referring to the drag being presented and judged on *RuPaul's Drag Race* and its spinoff shows, such as *RuPaul's Drag U*. As stated in Benny LeMaster's piece, *Discontents of Being and Becoming Fabulous on RuPaul's Drag U: Queer Criticism in Neoliberal Times*, *Drag U* embraces gender-normative (cisgender) bodies in place of gender-anormative (trans) ones, and it achieves this through hegemonic notions that presuppose a proper feminine gender expression (LeMaster, 2015, p. 176). In *Drag U*, cisgender "biological" women, who have failed to properly perform their gender, are transformed into hyperfeminine drag queen versions of themselves for the sake of "feeling sexy," and to become more attractive to their husband. The woman who was deemed the winner of this contest show was the woman who transformed the most and got the highest score by the judges. "Admittedly, *Drag U* affirms the presence of gender-variant bodies with its drag queen professors; however, *Drag U* rhetorically frames those drag queen professors as men in

costumes, which stifles the possibility of drag as a legitimate form of gender expression” (LeMaster,168).

RuPaul’s most popular show, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, is not much different than *Drag U*, except instead of pushing patriarchal, heteronormative ideals of acceptable femininity on to cisgender women, it is placed on mostly gay men. Tasked with being as hyperfeminine as possible to achieve the show’s sexist standard of beauty, gender bending, or experimental expression of gender is far from encouraged. Consumption of this kind of dismissive messaging is highly problematic to the targeted queer audience of these programs. I argue that the alternative styles of drag performed in Knoxville are vastly different than the popular styles celebrated on television.

Because the vast majority of queer theories have come from cisgender gay and lesbian (more gay than lesbian) camps, many queer theories tend to focus more on gay and lesbian identities and embodiments and less on the rhetorical and discursive subjugation of gender variant and/or trans bodies and identities (LeMaster, 2015, p. 172). This quote exemplifies the gap in queer academic research and why I have decided to focus on gender variant/gender queer/transgender drag performers for my thesis. Additionally, my thesis will fill gaps in queer academic research of the American South, by diving into what makes Knoxville, Tennessee a fascinating and unique case study. In LeMaster’s closing statements, he expresses a need for a more expansive understanding of drag, which is one of the things I am trying to articulate in my research. In his final paragraph he states, “I end by advocating for a broad understanding of drag as a far more

complicated social identity than simply gay (or not) men (or not) dressed in women's clothes (or not)" (LeMaster, 2015, p. 182). This further adds to the importance and relevancy of the topic of my research into gender queer drag performers.

The South is a very unique space for drag. This can be seen in Ashely A. Baker and Kimberly Kelly's, *Live like a king, y'all: Gender negotiation and the performance of masculinity among Southern drag kings*. This research study is based off interviews of twenty-seven drag kings in the South. In their analyses, they elucidate why the South is a distinctive space for drag and discuss the motivations and outcomes of female masculinity:

"Our findings also indicate that Southern drag kings differ from other kings that have been previously studied in two key ways. First, Southern kings cite individualistic reasons for participating in drag as opposed to a combination of individual and social motivations. Second, challenging the gender system is not a primary goal. Whereas drag in other areas of the country is overtly political and has feminist motivations, Southern drag kings use drag as an individual way to escape the gender-rigid environment in which they live" (Baker and Kelly, 2016, p. 47).

What makes the South a special region of the country when it comes to personal motivation to perform drag, is the desire to escape the conservative climate that actively oppresses the queer people living there.

In a Southern context, positive messages about queer cultures or transgender identities are uncommon and drag provided, in many cases, the only sources of information, as opposed to being one of many sources available in other parts of the country (Baker and Kelly, 2016, p. 57). The androgynous nature of drag in Knoxville not only gives space for queer expression, but also exposes other queer folk to other possibilities of gender beyond the binary. The interviewed kings in this study did not state that their primary mission in doing drag was to resist, but that is what they did. “Though the South may not be ready for overt challenges to the gender hierarchy, drag provides a safe haven for many to be themselves and feel comfortable in a culture where traditional gender roles are based in conservative religion” (Baker and Kelly, 2016, p. 62).

Beyond its deeply religious attitudes and conservative political climate, there are other contributing factors pointed out in this article to consider when questioning the obstacles gender queer people face when living in the South.

“We find that context shaped drag kinging, leading to variations in how drag is understood and in content of performances. More conservative gender norms, lower levels of education, and lack of media attention to female masculinity all provide a context in which drag takes on a different meaning and purpose for individuals” (Baker and Kelly, 2016, p. 61).

This statement affirmed my previously held notion of the importance of representative media attention while also shedding light on factors such as education and socioeconomic status.

Another interesting finding of Baker and Kelly's study was the creation of close knit drag families.

“In addition to a greater sense of self-acceptance, drag kings also reported intense network ties—some referred to these networks as families. This choice of analogy is perhaps unsurprising, given the centrality of family in Southern cultures. In the case of drag kings, rejection by biological families may have spurred on a search for alternative family, or what Weston (1997) refers to as ‘families we choose’” (Baker and Kelly, 2015, p. 54).

I explore what having their drag family as their chosen family allows them to feel, affirm, and achieve. The methods used by Baker and Kelly in this study allowed them to draw clear conclusions of drag king performance in the South is unique.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS AND MATERIALS

Documentary Filmmaking

In my research, I use documentary film making as my main form of methods. I think by doing so I am able to account for the life experiences and stories of genderqueer people living in the South. I also believe that I am able to create a living oral history that will live online available to anyone.

“One of the great advantages of oral history is that it allows scholars and others to explore contemporary culture in great detail. By interviewing a variety of people oral historians can give voice to groups that have often been either deliberately or accidentally excluded from the historic record. Everyday life can be recreated in vivid detail. However, the traditional oral history, once recorded, often disappears into a file cabinet. By combining oral history with documentary production, we can create a living art form” (Stine & Hepp 2015, pg 1).

Through the creation of a documentary short film, I interview, observe and hold conversations with genderqueer drag entertainers that make up a prominent drag family of Knoxville, Tennessee. Through documentary filmmaking, I accurately portray the lives of queer people in the south and tell their stories. I observe them while documenting footage of their everyday lives. I enter their homes and have them verbally explore their histories, being queer in Knoxville. I created character portraits on each queen in the family that is participating and wove them together to make a cohesive narrative. I open my film with an overview of all of them, then lead into separate individualized segments

and sequences. I show them living and experiencing joy in their home. I also show how they explore gender through their art at public drag shows in the city of Knoxville.

I think this documentary of genderqueer drag performers will not only be important to queer geography theory, but also add to the much-needed archive of southern queer joy and livingness. My film portrays the lives and experiences of a genderqueer drag family in the South. The film shows the rich and joyous narratives that exist in a space where they are not openly welcome. My film shows that queer joy and happiness live here. Queer southerners have come a long way, but we still have so much more to do here. I hope that my film shows the progress, places of improvement, and normalize queer livingness here.

I have spent my entire life growing up in the South. I was raised, mildly sheltered, in a Christian home. Queer representation was not something I was shown and I did not know enough to seek it out. When I thought of queer people, I thought of New York City or cities out on the West Coast. And because of this I never thought I belonged in the South. It took many years of intentional education on queer topics for me to realize that there were and continue to be vibrant queer existence in the South. “LGBTQ+ history – especially in the southern locations, both urban and rural– remains severely understudied” (McGehee, 261). In my work I add to the body of knowledge and historical remembrance of queer people living in the South. I think that through film as my method I will be able to “bring to light the complexities and particularities of the lives of gay individuals and of the drag scenes in such a conservative region” (McGehee, 262). The lives of the Gloss family, or House of Commitment, are recorded and archived, and the

stories of their lives will be accessible to queer people in the South who very much need them.

There are a few conflict points in my film. The conflict between being queer in the South being one of them. I show that queer joy and livingness can and is felt in the South. That no matter what oppressive attitudes that queer people face, there is still joy and happiness in our everyday life. There are also internal conflicts within my characters. Based on my own experience of being queer, I know the internal conflicts are very real. I was highly interested to see that those that I interviewed had many internal conflicts in the present or past that they were willing to share. I also get to know about past experiences, good and bad, being a drag entertainer in the South and how being a part of a drag family has affected their experience. I get to know how they feel being who they are and doing what they do in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Critical Reflexivity

I engage in constant critical reflexivity throughout my research process. “A reflexive approach recognizes the centrality of the subjectivity of the researcher to the production and representation of ethnographic knowledge. Reflexivity goes beyond the researcher's concern with questions of ‘bias’ or how ethnographers observe the ‘reality’ of a society they actually ‘distort’ through their participation in it” (Pink 2021). I am constantly being self-conscious of myself and my own thought process throughout my research. Through keeping a research diary, I record my reflexive observations. It contains my thoughts and ideas about the research process, its social context, and my role

in it (Dowling 2021, pg 35). In this research diary I can consistently be checking on the implications and effects of my research.

I understand geography to be a visual discipline. I think that through the use of a written thesis and film will make the information presented more understandable.

Through the use of a visual component and some participatory data collection, I am able to accurately represent the histories and experiences of a southern, genderqueer, drag family. Critical reflexivity throughout the filming and research process has given me the opportunity to make genuine connections that shed light on topics that need to be illuminated. My research is stronger, and more critically centered by keeping a running list of thoughts and notes filled with questions that come to mind while in the research process. I can use them to reflect on the questions I ask and also use them to keep myself accountable for the blind spots I have when exploring topics around discrimination and hate that I do not personally face in my own everyday life.

In an additional effort to employ reflexivity and to fortify research relationships made, I turned my camera over to them and allowed them to ask me any questions they had for me. I do not want them to feel as though I am the keeper of knowledge or like they cannot investigate my life like I have theirs. Although this section of data collection will not be in my film, I think that it is important to still do as it gives my participants an opportunity to study me like I have them. After reading about Thomas' (1997) experience with turning the camera and putting herself in front of the researcher's gaze, I was inspired to do the same in order to reinscribe power dynamics. The camera became the technology that was able to break down power relations and give my participants the

same opportunity to question me like I had them (Pink 2021). Like Thomas and Pink, I did not want the people that I am observing to feel like just a research subject. I acknowledge that I am getting much more out of my research than they are, but I hope that I can work to make them feel like they have power in this process. By turning the camera around and showing them the same vulnerability that they have shown me, I hope to reinscribe power to the people who are making my research possible. I will also be using these interviews of me to check my critical reflexivity, as most of the questions my participants asked me had to do with my motivations for studying trans rights as someone who is in the queer community, but not trans. Having these inquisitive and reflective interviews with my participants will make my research more critically reflexive and hold me accountable to my participants.

Inductive Approach

In my research, I take an inductive approach. I think that observing patterns, collecting interviews, and then drawing conclusions is going to be the best way to find the answers I am looking for. I do not want to go into my research assuming the ways in which these drag performers make spaces of survival and resistance. I would like to learn as much as I can from them and then draw conclusions. I recorded character portraits of members of the House of Commitment, using a zoom microphone and lavalier microphones and capturing the footage of their interviews with a C100 camera. My analysis of my interview is qualitative, and I also employ a narrative analytical approach since I am trying to learn more from people's stories and lived experiences. I lightly enhance natural lighting, with soft box covered LED lights. My film is approximately 30

minutes long where I dive deeply into a predominantly genderqueer drag family of Knoxville. I want my audience to see their everyday lives in motion and how they band together to not only survive this hostile landscape, but create queer spaces that allow their genderqueer expression to be celebrated. The House of Commitment being my film characters/research participants, as many of the members of this family identify as genderqueer or transgender drag entertainers. They each share with me what it means to be a part of the family, what being a part of the House of Commitment has allowed them to accomplish in all regards of their life, such as gender expression, artistic education, and entertainment opportunities. Each person in my film has a reason for why they are a part of their family, and each family member brings something important to the table. They all rely on each other for support in varying fashions.

I do think I was able to capture what I set out to capture in my film. I received many responses from the audience at my film screening applauding the honesty and authenticity of the voices shown. I also received an offer to enter my film into the queer archives of Knoxville. I think through my film I was able to give a platform to some voices that are almost always ignored and purposefully ignored.

Post Film Analysis

After finishing my film, I held a screening through the University Pride Center at UTK and had those who came to my screening answer some film related questions through a google form. I wanted to know their reactions and thoughts on the content of the film. I wanted to know lasting impressions of the film, if any. I wanted my viewers to tell me what they think is made clear and what needs more explanation. In addition to

using the feedback responses to improve the editing and composition of my film, I was also able to get data on the impact of my film. I think that my audience, cultivated by Pride Center and posters placed in queer spaces around Knoxville, is the exact audience that I desire feedback from. They will have queer perspective and experience behind them while evaluating the validity of my film. I think that having more queer people's view on my research will enrich it. The main audience for my film and research is Queer Southerners. I can expect the audience to know what it feels like to be queer living in the South. I also hope to reach those who don't identify themselves as LGBTQ+ through the use of emotions. I assume this film will be positively received by my audience and hope that it can be used to help younger queer people make queer space for themselves, even if it is just a digital online space where they are watching the film. I hope that my audience can find hope and courage to be themselves. I know living in the South can make being yourself more difficult given conservative social attitudes. Even if it's only for a few minutes, I want Queer Southerners to feel seen and celebrated; and I want the existence of queer joy and resistance in the South to be documented.

Contextualizing the “Hostile” Region

State Level Laws/Actions Against Queer People

According to USA Today, Tennessee is ranked 42 out of the 50 states for LGBTQ+ people to live in (Byners, USA Today, 2020). The rationale for the ranking is demonstrated in the state's legislatures' seemingly undying efforts since 2019 to eradicate all rights for the queer people that live in the state, including those that have been put in

place by the federal supreme court. Legislation that has been introduced include bills on bathrooms, education, healthcare, marriage rights, and anti-drag. Some proposed measures, such as the bathroom, education, and anti-drag bills have passed while others continue to hang over the heads of LGBTQ+ people fighting for equality and basic human rights. In 2021, The bathroom bills, known as SB1367 and HB1233, force business owners to post signs at the entrance of bathrooms declaring that the bathroom users must use the gendered bathroom of their sex at birth. Those who do not comply could face legal repercussions. In, 2021, Education bills SB0228 and HB0003 barred transgender athletes from participating in any middle school or high school sport teams or events. Per the education bill passed, transgender child athletes are being forced to prove their sex at birth and banned from participating in the gender group they identify with. To take a step further in eradicating the existence of queer individuals in the state, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee signed SB1229 into law, making it mandatory for teachers and schools to alert the parents of their students 30 days in advance, when they will be teaching anything having to do with sexual orientation or gender identity so that the parents can decide if they want their child to opt-out. So not only is the government working to strip LGBTQ+ Tennesseans from rights, the government does not want their existence acknowledged.

When it comes to bills pending in the state legislature, things get very scary. The Tennessee legislature has tried to circumvent the supreme court decision on gay marriage through way of religious rights, but in doing so they almost legalized child marriage in Tennessee by not including an age minimum in the proposed and ultimately failed bill. I

find it very interesting and ironic that the same governmental body that places all their “concerns” on the safety of children forgot to protect children when trying to rip marriage rights away from queer people in the state. But beyond the unconstitutional contradiction, SB0126 and HB1027 pose a serious threat to transgender minors in the state of Tennessee. These bills prohibit doctors from providing gender affirming care to minors, which can oftentimes be lifesaving. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, for transgender and nonbinary children and adolescents, early gender affirming care is crucial to overall health and well-being as it allows the child or adolescent to focus on social transitions and can increase their confidence while navigating the healthcare system (*Gender-Affirming Care and Young People - Hhs.gov*). Depriving children of crucial care that they need early on seems to be the best way of protecting them in the eyes of the Tennessee legislature.

When it comes to the anti-drag bills being sent through the state legislature, many of the people I have talked to in my film, and at protests feel it is the start of a dangerous slippery slope. Because who draws the line between male/female impersonator and transgender individual? Tennessee republican representatives are voting to ban public drag and drag anywhere children could possibly be present. Which opens the questions: when does this surveillance of gender expression begin? Who decides as to what is drag and what is just gender expression? These are some questions transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer people in Tennessee are being forced to consider, and that is terrifying. On, February 23 of 2023, the anti-drag bill was passed by the Tennessee house of representatives and is awaiting to be signed by Bill Lee into law.

City Protests Around All-Ages Drag Shows

The week of Christmas 2022, I was wrapping presents, making myself a grilled cheese and waiting for my wife to come home from work when I saw that Christian nationalist groups had gathered in front of the Tennessee Theatre to protest the popularly advertised drag show that was happening in the theatre that night. I immediately dropped everything and got into my car, having no idea what to expect when I arrived alone downtown. As soon as I turned the corner onto Gay Street, I heard chaos. The side of the theater was covered in colorful signs, pride flags, and beautifully queer people fighting to be heard and protected (Chapter 3, Figure 3.1.) On the other side were prominent Christian pastors, and their followers holding up signs and sheets calling for the protection of children from drag events. Signage included text saying “18+ gets rid of us,” “Stop sexualizing children,” and “groom dogs not kids” (Chapter 3, Figure 3.2.) In large, all capital letters, a twin bed sheet read, “DRAG QUEENS ARE PEDOPHILES” (Chapter 3, Figure 3.3.) But, from the things the pastors were saying, it seemed to be more than just protecting children. It seemed to me that their goal was to make queer people feel out of place and unwelcome in this city. Working towards their greater goal of eradicating queer people all together.

As I made my way to the theater, on the LGBTQ+ side, I heard a man on a megaphone shouting “God will never love you the way that you are.” I could not determine who exclaimed the statement, but I do know that all their followers joined along. There was thick tension between both sides, and many times, the Christian nationalist group would send people over to the LGBTQ+ side to start physical



Figure 3.1. Protest Signs



Figure 3.2. Anti-Drag Signs



Figure 3.3. Proud Boys

altercations. In the end, the LGBTQ+ side continued to grow bigger and bigger, and stayed until there was no one on the opposing side, a victory that does not reflect what is happening in the state legislature. As I spoke with the people at the protest, many queer people in Knoxville felt as though they were under attack. A lot of people felt as though this was anti-LGBTQ+ action under the guise of “protecting children.” As there is much more action being made to hurt queer people than there is to protect and help children in need.

Following the intense night of the December protest, WVLT, a Tennessee news outlet, reported I that Ken Peters, from Patriot church, is one of the pastors here in Knoxville leading the anti-drag movement. Peters has been working to get all public property drag shows canceled. Citing personal opinions such as the idea that “I [also] think drag in general, is sinful and immoral,” and “We love the people, but that doesn’t mean we aren’t going to engage in a culture war,” and “you’re not taking our kids” (Ducre, WVLT).

Concluding Methodological Thoughts

When thinking about how all of these methodologies, theories and processes come together, I lean on Richa Nagar. In *Muddying the Waters*, she observes:

“These politics of language, location, engagement, and epistemic hierarchies raise several questions: Can notions such as solidarity and responsibility, trust and hope, vulnerability and reflexivity serve a useful purpose in ethically navigating the forms of epistemic violence in which metropolitan academics are, and will

always remain, complicit?...Can such ethics be articulated in ways that do not foreclose an intermingling of stories, truths, and affects, on the one hand, and commitments to scholarly objectivity, on the other?" (Nagar, pg 2).

I really enjoy this passage as it advocates for the complexities to be shown and not be flattened. The discussion on metropolitan spaces being considered privileged, sophisticated, research and nonmetropolitan spaces being raw, and not as highly regarded is a topic I see a lot in my own research as Knoxville can feel more nonmetropolitan than other cities. And I also think that my film and the way I went about interviewing my participants allowed for truthful storytelling. I think by putting the voices of my participants out there in film form works towards solidarity and works against being complicit academia.

My research is specifically in the South, and I feel some kind of duty to reason as to why my research matters or is significant in the grand scheme of academia and research as a whole. And why is that? Probably because the South is mostly nonmetropolitan, with a few exceptions, and therefore not regarded as sophisticated or given the same prestige as metropolitan research. But the experiences here matter and need to be researched, documented, and archived for future generations of queer southerners. And that is exactly what I aim to do with my research.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Documentary Interview Findings

RQ1:

What are the rewards that come along with performing drag in a high-risk area (the South)? What has drag allowed these trans individuals to explore about themselves and their world around them?

Doing drag in the South has afforded all of my participants differing opportunities, many of which have furthered their personal drag and art careers. For Daphne, it helped bridge the gap between confused and at peace. Although she has always known she is trans, she didn't always have the exact words to describe what she was feeling and what she was pushing down inside of herself. "It was like... there was this person, Andrew, and I knew what he was supposed to do, I knew what people wanted him to want, and I knew the things that were problems too... Life just really felt like I was doing my best to keep that character on track... it just wasn't me, I didn't feel connected to it." Daphne recalls the first time she saw a drag show being overcome with fear. Fear that she could not push down who she was for much longer. As she began to surround herself with drag and friends that do drag, she began to make the connection to her own womanhood. Daphne definitively stated that drag did not make her trans, drag made her realize she had been trans all along, which is not the case for everyone who does drag. But for her, drag was the thing that got her to the cathartic point of performing gender as a woman. "Through insane amounts of makeup, hideous wigs that I would

never put on my head now, and these girls just being so goofy and extra saying ‘bitch do it,’ and then like letting myself [do it]... there was like this moment of [realizing] something about it connected.” Daphne being able to see herself in the feminine form she’s always wanted to be and seeing that there is space for her to do so safely, resulted in her immediately exploring her gender in a way she never allowed herself to do before.

When it comes to Phoenix’s experiences around drag, I found very similar connections being made between her drag and her femininity and confidence towards transitioning. Phoenix said she never would have gotten the confidence to wear makeup and present gender as a woman if it were not for her doing drag. She notes that when she originally started to dabble in drag, she was still living with her biological family who pushed stereotypical gender norms onto her. Not only did drag allow her to build confidence for her transition, but it also helped her express her artistry, something she holds very near and dear to her. Doing her makeup became a ritual to her. Something she could do for herself every day to reflect on her beauty and hone in on her artistic makeup skills, putting her one step closer to fulfilling her dreams of becoming a professional makeup artist. A dream Phoenix knows she can reach because she met another trans woman in Knoxville’s community who became a makeup artist for New York Fashion Week. A person who was brought into her life because of her drag mother Daphne. Phoenix also expresses the importance of being seen and how drag made her feel more visible to her community which in turn made her feel very powerful and secure in herself. Phoenix said that if it weren’t for drag, she does not think she ever would have allowed herself to explore gender outside of the safety of her bedroom.

RQ2:

Is Knoxville, Tennessee a hostile landscape for Queer people? And are Queer folk afforded the opportunities to thrive here?

Although all of my participants felt like there are people in the South who very clearly do not want them to be there, every participant said the South, more specifically Knoxville, felt like home. Each participant expressed their own forms of appreciation for the Southern city and all of them feel like they belong here regardless of the conservative attitudes that dictate and permeate local government. Daphne, Phoenix, and Eli were all born and raised in the area and consider Knoxville to be their home base. Azelia also shares some of these attitudes about Knoxville and says this city feels more like home than the small town she came from in Germany. Azelia shared that she actually faces more discrimination being a person of color in the South than she does being a trans woman in the South. Even with her facing racism and transphobia, she still says she loves Knoxville and out of all of the places she's lived, it feels the most like home.

All of my participants are seasoned travelers and most of them have lived in various locations, but still express a fervent attitude that Knoxville is their home and they have all of the things here that they need to succeed. Admittedly, the three born and raised Knoxvilleans did not always feel this ease and comfort of home. Eli stated that for 18 years growing up he saw himself leaving Knoxville behind and moving to the big city. After leaving his biological family's home and moving around the south east for a couple years, Eli came back to Knoxville and declared, "I finally realized that I have all of the

things here that I need to succeed and be happy and I literally just have to appreciate them and take advantage of them. And I have and now it does feel like home because I've made it that way."

After listing her many physical and emotional ties to Knoxville, Phoenix exclaimed that she was not going to give up on her home. She said, "I want to fight the fight. Not that I want to be having to fight the fight, but there are fights to be had and I need to be a part of them." Knoxville is the only city she has resided in and she feels incredibly tied to the city and to the South as a whole. Growing up and into her teenage years and realizing she was queer, she felt the place was too small for her to survive here. But with time and personal growth, she says she was able to see the outreach and opportunity for queer people in Knoxville and could envision herself being able to live a happy, successful life. Phoenix also notes her affinity for the Appalachian mountains and music styles that she has grown up admiring and pulling inspiration from in her own musical passions.

Although there have been many instances of joy in the House of Commitment, the hostility of the South has reared its ugly head into the mix. Phoenix described a situation that happened recently involving neighborhood children riding their bikes and shouting transphobic slurs at the drag family's home. This and other transphobic threats of violence that have been inflicted upon the family are what Phoenix says puts them all at risk. "I am being told and led to believe that I shouldn't be here and that me just being here is putting me at risk." Phoenix says it is not rare for her to face very real threats of

violence in all facets of her life, including her workplace and her home. She attributes the uptick of emboldened transphobia to the recent anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation that has been pushed and passed in the Tennessee state government.

Overall, the hostility of the South towards queer people is a very complex thing that people experience at different rates and in different ways. What can be mutually felt is that being trans in the South has been and still remains to be difficult. In the case of this family, they have been able to persevere transphobia and threats of violence with the help and support of each other. In the resilient words of Phoenix, “They have my back, and I have their back. And it’s important that we have each other’s backs, because things down here are not good right now.”

RQ3:

What does being in a drag family do for drag entertainers? How do these families form and why do they form?

What I found during the interviews for my film was that drag families were formed for a multitude of reasons, almost all coming from a place of need. One being the need for a chosen family since their biological family chose not to be in their life. Or that they were living in a situation of violence and needed a safe space to live in and be themselves in. The biggest need for the formation of their drag family was being around others that were like them, trans. My participants expressed that the greatest source of pain in their lives previous to joining their drag family was feeling like what they were doing was not okay and wrong. My participants said that as soon as they were around

their drag family they felt validated and supported during their transition. Half of my participants expressed that being around and a part of their drag family was the catalyst for their decision to transition.

Phoenix expressed that being around her drag family and hearing she/her pronouns allowed her to explore her gender in a way that was unacceptable before. She noted that seeing her trans drag family being okay made her realize that she could be okay transitioning. In addition to feeling validated through her drag family, Phoenix was able to escape her biological home that was filled with threats of physical violence and was welcomed into a loving home where she could be herself.

When it came to the topic of family for Eli and what his drag family provided for him that his biological family could not, Eli stated, “As queer people I feel like a lot of times we miss out on having a family that understands us or that we can talk about our lives with.” Eli said that being a part of his drag family allowed him to “come home and be celebrated for [his] art and career and have a whole network of people who are not just great artists that [he] gets to collaborate with but also... [his] best friends.” He continues to say that he is “never alone and that is such a good thing.” Through his drag family, Eli was able to cultivate an extensive network of trans and queer people that were always there to support him.

Eli became a part of the House of Commitment through his close friendship with Daphne, his drag mother. Daphne let Eli follow her around to all her shows for a year and a half. This year and a half was filled with wig preparation, packing assistance, and

crashing on Daphne's couch whenever Eli needed shelter. Over the year and half Eli developed a strong desire to do drag himself and once he admitted his ambition to be the one on stage, Daphne was immediately supportive. Eli stated, "[Daphne] as a drag mom has been so good for my personal queer journey and my drag journey. Because she's not just my drag mom when we're in face at the bar... we live together, we're best friends, she's my drag mom all the time." Eli was able to learn valuable lessons from Daphne, ranging from drag specific lessons, to lessons on how to transition and live a joyfully queer life. When describing Daphne, Eli said, "My drag mom is... one of the best people I've ever met. She is always, always, always... trying to represent the underrepresented."

Azelia, another one of my participants who is a part of the House of Commitment, found her way into her drag family through meeting Daphne on the location-based LGBTQ dating app, Grindr. As an immigrant from Germany, Azelia relied on queer digital spaces to meet other queer people in Knoxville. Through Grindr, Azelia was able to connect with Daphne via Instagram. And after many days of scrolling and liking each other's pages the two decided to meet in person and have been inseparable since. Azelia is Daphne's most recent inductee into the House of Commitment. Because of becoming Daphne's drag daughter, Azelia instantly became a part of a network of queer people. This is what Azelia claims, made Knoxville feel like home. During our interviews, Azelia expressed immense appreciation for finding Daphne and becoming a part of her drag family. Not only because Azelia then had access to safe queer space and people. But especially for the love and emotional support of her new doting family. Azelia spoke lots about her personal struggles and insecurities that have

come from the experiences of her upbringing, being a person of color and her current immigration status. Azelia affirmed that her drag family has been there to help her through her internal battles of feeling accepted and also in securing her citizenship status. Daphne has been able to help find and connect Azelia to an immigration attorney that will help her be able to stay in Knoxville.

Azelia attributes her newfound security to her family, stating “I never had trans friends before... people didn’t get me... people think I am a clown... and with people calling me a joke I began to think I was a joke as well.” She believed that in order to feel belonging with other people, that she needed to be the butt of the joke. Since joining her family she has been able to be herself unabashedly and grow into the person she wants to be. Exuding pride, Azelia declared “I’m so glad I have [The House] they really helped me become the woman I am.”

The paradigm of a southern mother is very specific. Daphne claims that in the South there is a huge pressure to refine and push your kids. She feels that many of the connections she has to her southern roots are in the maternal instincts she feels towards her own drag children. Daphne includes that even the women that seem “confused or perturbed” by her existence still respect her for the relationship she holds with her children. Daphne states “I do feel like... a homemaker.” And makes ties between her idea of femininity and the roles in the home that she takes on with great success. Some of those roles being hostessing, organizing, planning, scheduling, and “bottomlining.” Daphne feels very connected to her southern femininity through her being a drag mother.

This connection and the love she receives from her family are her biggest gifts from motherhood. It is very clear that Daphne is a mother who would do anything for her children. Acts of financial, physical, and emotional support will always come freely to her children.

RQ4:

How is the Tennessee anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation affecting transgender drag entertainers in Knoxville?

Starting March 2023, gender affirming care has been banned for people under the age of 18 in Tennessee. The Tennessee state legislature is giving trans youth in the state, one year to end their gender affirming medical treatment, such as puberty blockers and other hormone therapies. There was previously a section in the bill that would make parents liable to charges of neglect and abuse for seeking gender affirming treatment for their children but was dropped during committee circulation. But the final signed bill that was put into law states that trans youth are actively being forced to end potentially lifesaving healthcare and enter back into their dysphoric gender at birth.

Every participant that I talked to stated firmly that HRT saved their life. While the House of Commitment helped Phoenix through her transition, starting hormone therapy is what she claims absolutely saved her life. Phoenix said that without a doubt if it were not for HRT and gender affirming care, she would absolutely be dead. She noted that the last push of puberty in her late teens was the most detrimental to her mental health. She said “With that last push of puberty... growing a beard made me not want to have a face.” She

went on to say “Thank god that I was able to get access to hormones before I was able to grow a full beard... because I couldn’t have dealt with that.” Phoenix went on to say that Tennessee is actively closing doors and taking away opportunities from trans youth by denying them gender affirming healthcare. In her words, HRT allowed her to feel whole and changed the entire way she lived her life. She was able to break detrimental patterns of self-sabotage and start caring about her own life. She said “it all starts with yourself... if you don’t have the access to take care of yourself, good things are not going to come.” Phoenix expressed immense heartbreak and concern for the young trans people in Tennessee that are not going to be able to access the gender affirming care that could very much save their life.

Eli had the exact same response to me asking him where he thought he would be without gender affirming care. Eli, a trans man, said for the majority of his life before transitioning he tried to end his life once every other year. He said that he spent most of his life in and out of the mental hospital receiving help for his suicidal thoughts. Eli said as soon as he started hormones that the impulse to hurt himself stopped. He also shared that hormones were the reason his biological family started to accept him for who he is and his transition. He added that he still has depression, as he has been depressed from a young age, but the constant desire to unalive himself has subsided completely. Daphne and Azelia completely agree with Eli and Phoenix that HRT and gender affirming care are essential healthcare needs for trans people and trans youth, and taking it away from trans people is a very dangerous thing to do. All of my participants feel as though the

Tennessee government is outlawing gender affirming care to minors in another effort to eradicate trans people from the state.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Creative Choices and Reasonings

Throughout the filming and editing process, there were many iterations of my film. The first being *Queer Joy*. *Queer Joy* was exactly what it was meant to be, a joyous film about queer life in the southern city of Knoxville, Tennessee. It was filmed in mid-2022 and followed Eli from the House of Commitment. I wanted to push back on the commonly held narrative that queer people cannot be happy in the South and show that we can and do thrive here. But as things began to turn politically and I began speaking with more people in the House, I felt that I could not portray a nothing but joyful narrative and needed to adopt a more complex and confrontational one. So, I shifted the mood in my film to accurately represent reality. I still left pockets of joy and humor, but the severity of the situation was very evident.

Through the use of creative methods, I was able to approach my research in very unique ways. For example, I was able to really get to know my participants by seeing them in various environments. Through the process of filming we were able to really bond between takes. In addition to the advantages I was able to gain through creative methods, I believe my participants were also positively affected by my choice of methods. I know for a fact that through the creation of my film I was able to make a group of people feel important. A group of people that are often rendered to feel the opposite and are continued to feel under attack. Throughout the process, my participants often expressed many feelings of excitement to see the film and to be “movie stars.” And after I completed the film and held a showing, they were truly able to have their own

moments. All four of my participants came to my film screening to watch themselves on the big screen. They also came to answer questions from the audience in a lively 30-minute panel discussion after the screening. It was clear that my participants enjoyed seeing the film and having their stories being accurately told. They also appreciated all the questions the audience had for them and were able to serve back honest thoughtful answers to the questions they received. After the film and panel event I received lots of feedback from those who came. Many note that the queer space that was made because of this event was incredible. We were able to celebrate one another for our differing queerness and it was a beautiful thing for everyone to behold and to be a part of.

Film Analysis Findings

I was able to hold my film screening through the support of the University of Tennessee's Pride Center. As a part of their film series for trans visibility, the pride center booked the location and did advertising for the event through sending emails to their subscribers and posting on their social media account. I also pursued advertising my event through commissioning a local queer artist to make a printed poster for the film and putting up the poster around UTK and in the queer spaces of Knoxville, like South Press and CORE. This poster can be seen in figure 5.1. I hoped that through my advertising efforts I would be able to bring in more queer people to see my film and give me their thoughts.

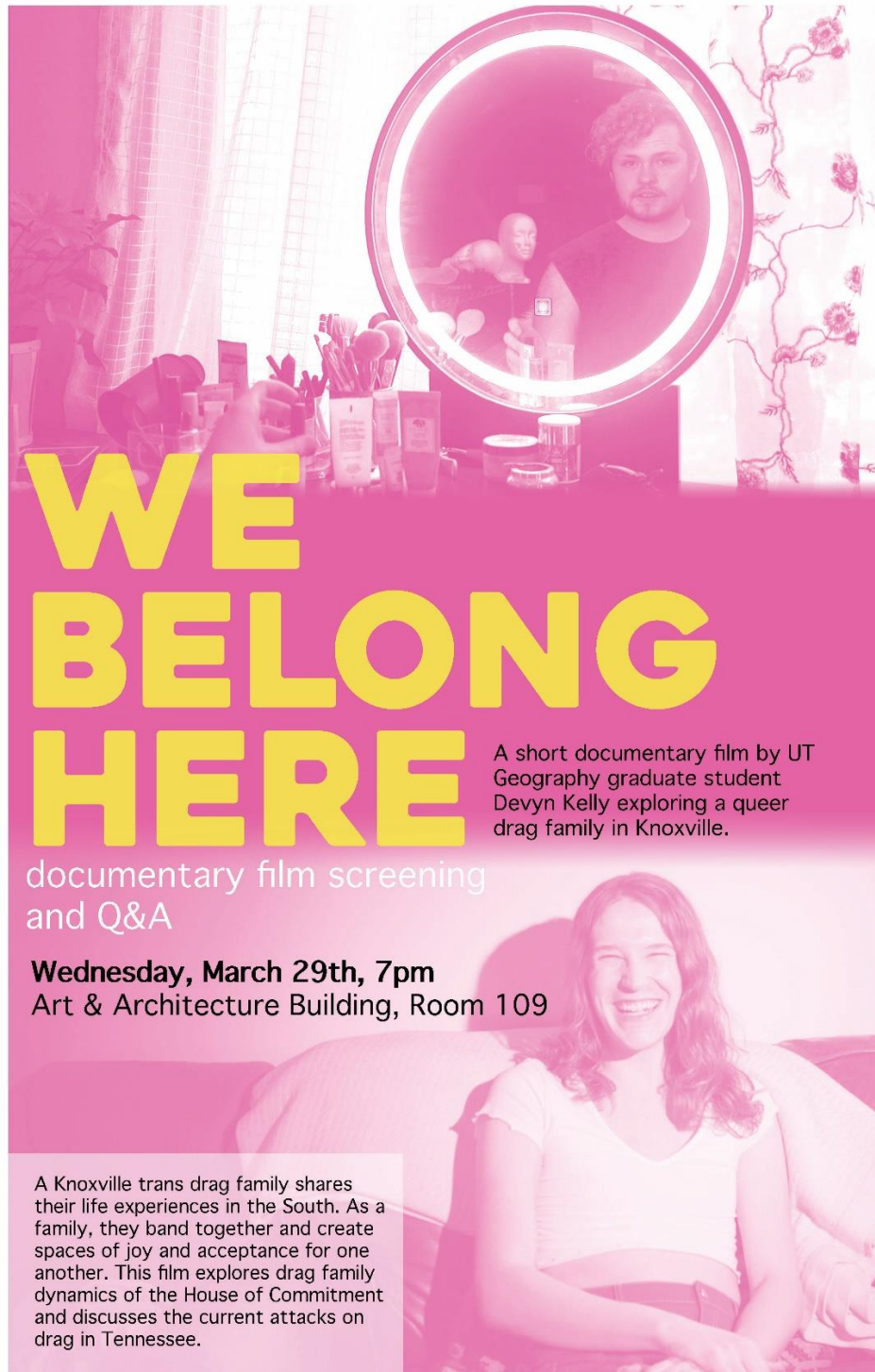


Figure 5.1. Poster 1

After the showing of my film and before the panel, I posted a QR code to the screen and told the audience to scan the code to fill out a google form to give me feedback on the film. I found that 60.7% of those that took my film's survey identified with the LGBTQIA+ community. This demographic split can be seen in chapter 4, table 4.1.

When it comes to motivations to see the film and come to the screening event, I found almost half of those who took my survey were there due to personal interest in the film, with current events and other being tied for the second biggest motivation to come to see the film. This breakdown can be seen in chapter 4, table 4.2.

I also found that the strongest reaction for people regardless of sexual orientation or identity, was an emotional response (which can be seen in chapter 4, figure 4.3.). Out of the emotional responses, emotional reactions such as love, joy, sadness, gratitude, and fear were common subthemes found in responses. When it comes to the second most response, political reactions, respondents often mentioned the trans community is under attack and we need to fight as a community and support difference. The third main theme I found was an academic response, including the need to archive my film and that my film is filling a need in research in elevating trans voices. Overall, I found that LGBTQIA+ and non-LGBTQIA+ respondents followed the same reactionary patterns to my film and its subject matter.

Demographics

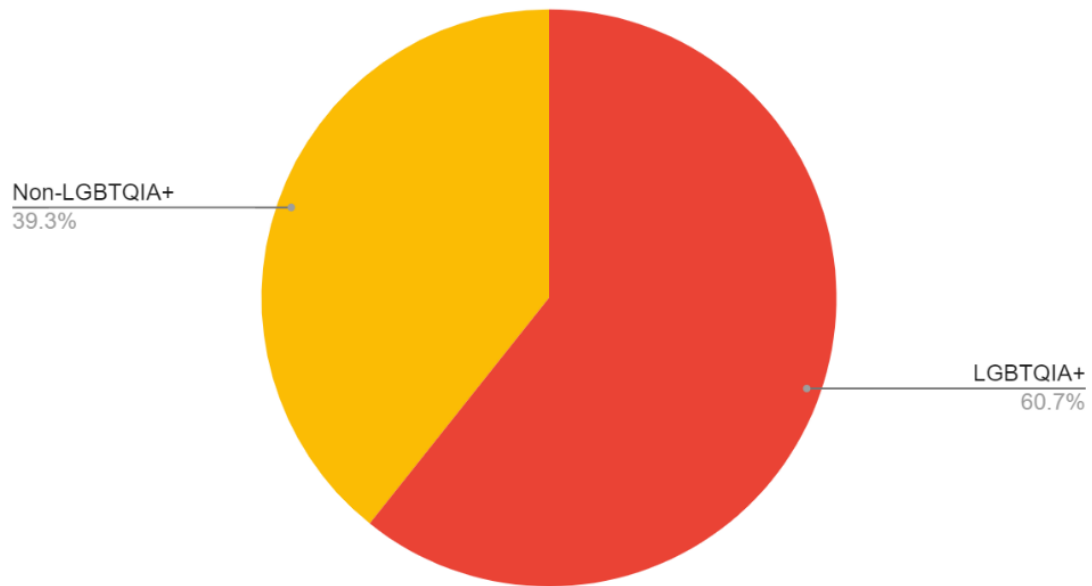


Figure 5.2. Queer Demographic Distribution

Audience Motivations

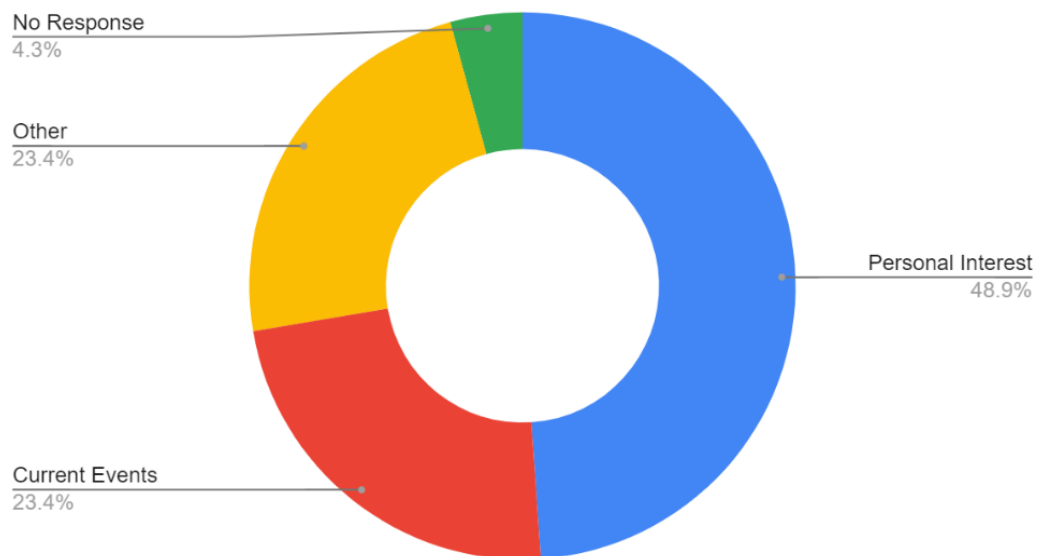


Figure 5.3. Audience Motivations

LGBTQIA+ and Non-LGBTQIA+ Reactions

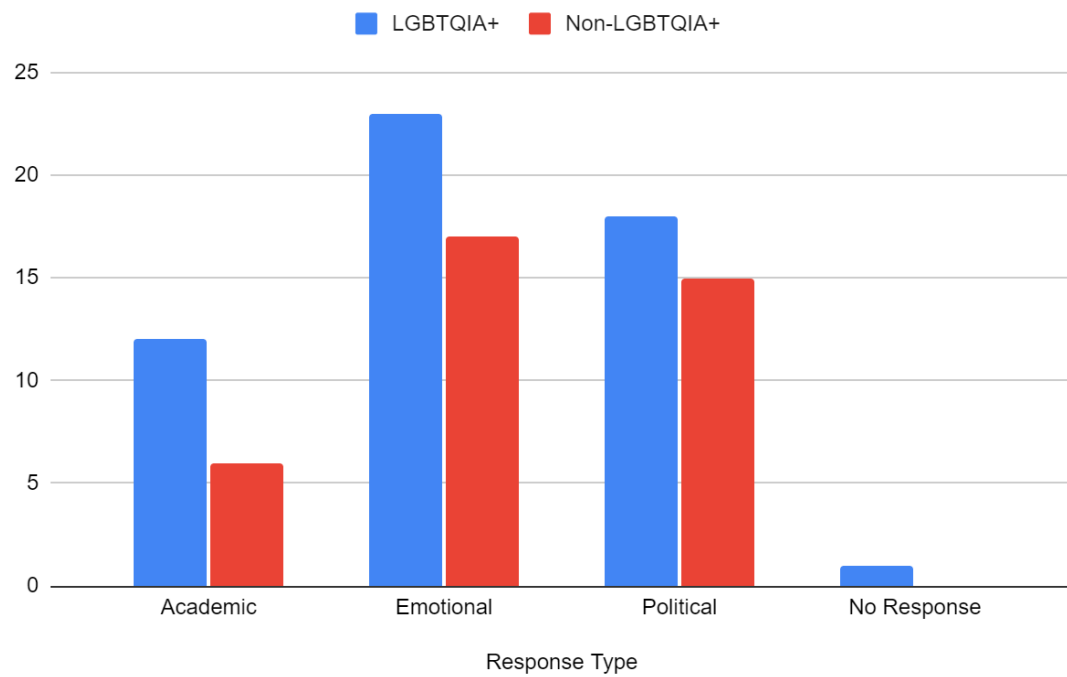


Figure 5.4. Audience Reaction Chart

Final Thoughts

I think this film and thesis work will have social significance because Queer people deserve to be understood. I sought to find out if drag helps those who do it explore parts of themselves society has told them are permanent and unchangeable. I wanted to know the role drag can play in gender discovery for those living in the South. I also wanted to find more out about the drag family dynamic and how having a chosen family support system influences and affects the lives and performances of the entertainer. And I feel as though I was able to answer these questions through documentary filmmaking interviews with trans drag entertainers. I wanted to focus on the everyday joy that comes from queer existence because for far too long has film interpretation of queer life been depressing. Joy is universally felt regardless of identity and gender. I hope by showing queer joy in the bible belt can show the beauty of resilience that many beyond the queer community can relate to and feel. I want to highlight the true strength behind the joyful moments. And I want those who watch my short film to take away a deeper understanding of queer life. An understanding that will afford queer people hope and give everyone else a newfound respect for the strength of queer resilience in the South. Because in the wise words of Phoenix, “We are here, we are very here, and we are not going anywhere.”

Recommendations for Further Research

If I were to expand on this research, I would have opened my scope to include those who experience drag as a viewer too and what that does for them. I know from my own experience what drag did for me as a queer viewer, but I would love to conduct

focus groups with people who watch drag to get their reaction and response. I think drag is a very powerful thing and I want to know all effects of its power. I think I would still employ documentary filmmaking as my main method as it was an incredibly effective method for navigating and understanding the complexities of the subject matter. I think my film would show more drag performances and the variety of drag performances Knoxville entertainers put out. After hearing about Azelia's experiences with racism in the South, I would also like to interview a drag family that is predominately people of color so that I can get their experiences as a family and see how they compare to the predominately white drag family I did my research on. I think that research around a family of color's experiences in the South would be very valuable and insightful.

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VITA

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