

LESSONS FROM MY FRIEND SUE DAVIS:  
PRESERVING AN OKIE QUEER'S LEGACY OF  
RESILIENCE, RESISTANCE, AND RETURNING  
HOME

By

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AND RETURNING HOME

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Abstract: This paper examines the life and legacy of Queer Okie Sue Davis. Utilizing oral history interviews and autoethnography methods, Clementine highlights the history of one Oklahoma Lesbian who grew up in post-World War II America, organized for the Gay Liberation Movement in San Francisco in the 1970s, and came back home to recover from multiple traumatic events that she experienced due to homophobia and other forms of violence against her body. While Davis is the main narrative in this body of work, Davis' story is used to example the ways Queer Okies survive and thrive and makes room to understand the larger scope of Queer Okie legacy. Told in three parts, Part One works to discuss trauma perpetuated by state-sanctioned, regional, religious, familial, and intercommunal violence. In Part Two, the ways Okie Queers survive is centered through conversations including: Lesbian visibility, familial support, Queer love and longing, leaning into failure, creativity in communication, freedom of expression, and the formation of Queer Elder constellations that guide us. Part Three discusses the impact and importance of this work and leaves space to explore ways to expand the narrative around growing up Queer in Oklahoma and the impact Queer Okies have had on the movement overall. *Lessons from my Friend Sue Davis* offers readers a deeper understanding of resilience, resistance, and communal impact of intergenerational Okie Queer connections and utilizes Queer Theory and resources to showcase the cultural importance of connecting with Queer cultural methods when telling our stories.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Let Me Tell You About My Friend Sue**

Sue Davis and I have known each other for six years now. We met in early 2016 when I began volunteering at a local Queer community center in Tulsa. Sue was a seasoned volunteer by the time I showed up and eager to show me around. While decades separated us, we each appreciated the tenacity of the other. Our conversations were never dull, often full of laughter and sometimes heated in disagreement. We were routinely asked to quiet down. We never listened. It was evident from the beginning that we were going to be friends. What was not clear at first was what an impact our friendship would have on my personal and academic trajectories. Every Wednesday we sat together at the front desk, answering the phone and welcoming visitors as they arrived. When it was slow, we spent our time swapping stories and asking big questions about the state of queer liberation. Sue longed for a connection to younger queers in the community, something I could deliver. I wanted to soak up every minute of her energy and knowledge around the past.

The summer of 2017 brought political excitement for Sue and me when we began working on Shay White's campaign for Oklahoma House District 77.<sup>1</sup> Through this work I began learning some of the intricacies about her time in San Francisco and her connection to city

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<sup>1</sup> Nehemiah Frank, "Shay White Launches Campaign for House Seat Representative from Dist. 77," The Black Wall Street Times, June 7, 2017, <https://theblackwallstimes.com/2017/07/07/shay-white-launches-campaign-for-house-seat-representative-from-dist-77/>.

supervisor Harvey Milk.<sup>2</sup> Those early stories were almost always told through a hopeful lens. She had lived to see a Black man elected President of the United States and witnessed the Supreme Court overrule Oklahoma’s gay marriage ban in 2014.<sup>1</sup> The heavy stuff did not start to surface until much later, after years of trust built and traumas experienced together and separately. Like many people, I thought that we were about to see the first woman elected president of the United States in 2016. My partner at the time and I even threw a watch party. Things shifted dramatically when Trump was named victor. Casual conversations turned into more direct-action work. Over the next few years, Sue and I worked on many projects together through Oklahomans for Equality (hereafter OKEQ), local political organizing initiatives, and through a small activist collective called Tulsa Intersectional Activists or TIA.<sup>2</sup> From 2016 to 2018, things were heavy and tense at every turn. Sue started opening up more about her life experiences as she relived some of them in this new political climate. We went to many rallies and actions locally and even rushed James Lankford’s D.C. office together while attending Creating Change in 2018.<sup>3</sup> It was on that trip that I began to understand how impactful Sue’s story and the stories of other Oklahoma queers could be on younger generations. Sue’s story is the one that solidified my desire to hold space for

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<sup>2</sup> “Harvey Milk Biography,” Milk Foundation, accessed July 1, 2022, <https://milkfoundation.org/about/harvey-milk-biography/>.

<sup>1</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “Fact Sheet: Obama Administration’s Record and the LGBT Community,” National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration), accessed July 1, 2022, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/09/fact-sheet-obama-administrations-record-and-lgbt-community>.

<sup>2</sup> OKEQ, or Oklahomans for Equality, is a non-profit organization founded in 1980 that “seeks equal rights for LGBTQ+ individuals and their families.”

“Oklahoma’s Resource for LGBT Persons and Their Families,” OKEQ, accessed July 1, 2022, <https://www.okeq.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> Creating Change is the annual “national conference for LGBT equality” that is put on by the National LGBTQ Task Force.

“Creating Change,” National LGBTQ Task Force, March 8, 2016, <https://www.thetaskforce.org/creating-change/>.

Oklahoma Queers and their lived experiences. This thesis serves as my first solid attempt at telling Sue's story and truthfully, telling parts of my own. It serves as a record for all the work it took to get to this stage, in particular the amount of primary source research I have completed to be able to tell this story.

Spending the first two years of the COVID pandemic becoming an oral historian was interesting to say the least. I am fortunate that I entered the Oral History lineage of Mary Larson and Sarah Milligan.<sup>4</sup> I am thankful every day for Oklahoma State University faculty past and present who have made space for me in life-changing ways including Stacy Takacs, Megan Burke, David Gray, John Kinder, Matt Schauer, Laura Belmonte, and Rebecca Sheehan.<sup>5</sup> Thank you to Laura Arata for advising me through this process. I would also like to acknowledge David Macy, who is currently faculty at University of Central Oklahoma. He was the first openly Gay adult I ever met. When I came out in the Fall of 2006, I promptly went to a GSA meeting. There I was invited to a dinner at David's house. Seeing his home inspired my own, something I am very proud of. Without the above-mentioned individuals' support, trust, and the true understanding of what it takes to do this type of community work, I would have never made it this far within the academy. Sarah told me on multiple occasions that I was "uniquely positioned" to do this work.

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<sup>4</sup> "Meet Our Director," Center for Oklahoma Studies, accessed July 1, 2022, <https://cos.library.okstate.edu/center-for-oklahoma-studies/faculty-and-staff/meet-our-directors>.

"Sarah Milligan: Profile," Edmon Low Library, accessed July 1, 2022, <https://info.library.okstate.edu/sarah-milligan>.

<sup>5</sup> Stacy Takacs believed in me first and has changed my trajectory on more than one occasion. Megan Burke modeled what a very visibly Queer and Nonbinary academic professional could look like. David Gray helped me see that it was ok to critique things you love, because it can make both me and the thing stronger.

John Kinder told me my work was dangerous. It was the best compliment I have gotten to date.

Matt Schauer showed me what an ally in academia looks like. His encouragement in my first semester of grad school was vital to my success.

Laura Belmonte told me to leave for a while, something I will be eternally grateful for.

Rebecca Sheehan gave me space to remind myself that my work is and should remain interdisciplinary.



While I did not believe her in the beginning, I do now. The folks listed above solidified that for me in the academic realm. Thank you all for seeing me and making space for me to grow. Thank you for taking on my “what-ifs,” “why’s,” “try me’s” and “I’ll show them.”

I also want to hold space for the countless chosen family members that have supported me before and through this time. There are so many people that this list will never be complete, but I do want to call some of them by name. Those that have left this mortal plane include Tracy Allen, Greg Mayfield, Sheena Grewal, Peggy Makinson, and Gloria Dialectic. Those that are currently not in my orbit but forever part of my experience, you know who you are. Finally, those that are still leaning into my chaos and wonder: Olivia Lamb, Nkem Ike, Julian Currents, Jenny Briggs, Katanna Davis, Josh Lowe, Lindsey Cain, Esther Tirza McDowell, Taylor Raye, Liz Ternes, Molly Bryant, Jeremy Simmons, Jace Earwood, Lauren Zuniga, T. Anansi Wilson, Carolyn Wiley, Caroline Leithner, Gabrielle Miller, Loon Hartwell, Alexa Bottoms, Edgar Fabian Frias, Karl Jones, Zander Moricz, Donnavan Dillion, Andreas Copes, and so many others.

In the summer of 2018, I was part of the first LGBTQ+ youth summer camp in Oklahoma. That experience will forever hold a significant space in my memory. Watching queer kids dance to the Rent soundtrack while making nature crafts that symbolized their identities is something worth remembering. It was talking about Sue to a young lesbian from a small town in rural Oklahoma that convinced me to return to pursue a graduate degree. Watching this camper learn about their Lesbian elder and sit in awe with her story was the most beautiful thing. That camper said to me, “someone needs to tell these stories.” So here I am. Telling these stories.

At first the task seemed overwhelming. My position has afforded me the opportunity to know many impactful elders who deserve to be situated within the historical record. I had planned on focusing my efforts on a small anthology of short narratives about some of the members of the

local SAGE elder group in town, something I still hope to accomplish someday.<sup>6</sup> What started as a few weeks of quarantine to curb the spread of COVID-19 had turned to months. The summer was heavy, with the murder of George Floyd at the hands of state violence.<sup>7</sup> That summer brought a lot of tension to Tulsa overall and to my personal experience. I left the most traumatic relationship of my adult life that summer. That relationship worked to isolate me from my support system, including Sue.

Like many in her generation, Sue still struggles with the changing landscape of queer culture and identity. A lot has changed since she was outed in the late 1960s. We (the younger generation) have a much more expanded vocabulary and the benefit of new legacies of formalized Queer scholarship spaces. The reclamation of the “Q” was a point of contention in our early conversations and they/them pronouns were confusing to her, sometimes they still are.<sup>8</sup> When I came out as non-binary and changed my name and pronouns in early 2020, the tension with my new presentation along with the toxic relationship caused Sue and I to not talk for several months. When I left my ex-partner, she was one of the first people I reached out to. The conversation was long and full of tears. She had just gotten through a round of cancer treatment and I was dealing with a slew of emotions surrounding my separation. When she picked up the phone, it was like we had not skipped a beat. I had lost most of my family of origin years prior due to homophobia

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<sup>6</sup> “Our Story,” SAGE (SAGE, January 26, 2021), <https://www.sageusa.org/about-us/our-story/>. SAGE was once leveraged as an acronym but after having to change it several times throughout the years as language around identities widened, the organization is now SAGE, with no longer title connected to it.

<sup>7</sup> Dalton Bennett, Joyce Sohyun Lee, and Sarah Cahlan, “The Death of George Floyd: What Video and Other Records Show about His Final Minutes,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, May 30, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/05/30/video-timeline-george-floyd-death/>.

<sup>8</sup> Maddie, “Questioning ‘Queer’ across Generations,” *Autostraddle*, May 6, 2021, <https://www.autostraddle.com/queering-my-ears-listening-and-loving-in-queer-community-154389/>. Juliette Rocheleau, “A Former Slur Is Reclaimed, and Listeners Have Mixed Feelings,” *NPR* (NPR, August 21, 2019), <https://www.npr.org/sections/publiceditor/2019/08/21/752330316/a-former-slur-is-reclaimed-and-listeners-have-mixed-feelings>.

and white supremacy and I am so thankful that I did not lose Sue then, as she is a vital part of my chosen family.

That trauma, coupled with limitations due to the pandemic and the health and safety of queer elders, meant my research began to take a different form. My new plan focused Sue as my main historical lifeline, an entry into the Okie queer existence, the trauma and the magic. Telling Sue that I would be working with Oklahoma Oral History Research Program's (OOHRP) Diverse Gender and Sexuality Oral History Project was so exciting. Being disconnected from most of my family of origin means I often do not revel in my accomplishments in traditional ways. Often, I sleep through birthdays, Mother's Days, and Christmases. I often downplay my wins, but even I could not hide how proud I was to start doing this work. Sue just beamed and told me she knew I could do it and that they "had no idea what a handful I would be." Sue was right. While I had Sue's full support in doing Oral Histories, complete with her still unfolding list of people I should interview, convincing her that she was a worthy subject for my thesis took some convincing. This is the first lesson I learned from Sue:

*It is often the ones who think their story is "nothing special" that we have the most to learn from.*

Not only would she make a compelling case study in the ways in which Okie Queers have been active participants in the Gay Liberation Movement and are often overlooked or silenced, but it also allows me to pay respect to the story that got me here. A story I wish I would have had access to as a young, closeted queer growing up in Catoosa, Oklahoma. What I quickly discovered is how intertwined our experiences were, even though decades separated us. I had no idea how much I would continue to learn from Sue, or how much is still left to uncover in her story. I also had no idea how much I would learn about myself in the process.



Photo 2017 by Arlowe Clementine at OKEQ

## **Doubling Down on Our Truths: The Okie Queer Experience Cannot and Should Not Be Shared in a Vacuum**

If you were to meet Sue Davis on the street, you would have no idea how limitless she is. How vast her experiences have been. How hard she loves. She is a caregiver. It is her nature to put others before herself, to hold space for other's trauma. As mentioned in the foreword, I knew her years before I started peeling back the onion layers.<sup>9</sup> In the following pages, I will attempt to showcase Sue's legacy as an Oklahoman, Union advocate, military veteran, healer, Gay Liberation activist, friend, and coolest aunt around. I will explore some of the many ways that Sue impacted the larger historical narrative of contemporary American and Queer history, as well as the many ways she has impacted many Okie Queers on a personal level. Sue's story begins in 1942, in the middle of a World War, and is still ongoing today. As she enters her eighties, I imagine she is just as tenacious as she was in her twenties.

When I began my Oral History life interview series with Sue, I had a few formal interviews under my belt. Learning a few lessons along the way, I developed an extensive pre-interview process, as traditional research methods are not as helpful for queer histories. Pre-interviews are not an uncommon practice for oral historians. This space is often used to set parameters, clarify questions that came up during the research portion of preparation, and create a sense of comfortability between the narrator and the interviewer. I quickly learned that I needed to do the opposite of create comfortability, in some ways. I needed to learn the areas that brought up trauma from their lives and address how to proceed safely for the interview, ask how open

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<sup>9</sup> Devin McCue, "Shrek, the Unacknowledged Hero of Queer Youth, 20 Years Later," *The Mary Sue*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.themarysue.com/shrek-the-unacknowledged-hero-of-queer-youth-20-years-later/>.

they wanted to be about their sexuality on record, and pump them up when they feel like they have nothing of value to add. I also ask for cliff note type versions of some of the emotional stuff, so I could prepare myself slightly but also have an authentic reaction to the details discussed in the recording. We also sometimes strategize on how to speak their own truth while protecting the identity of others that are part of their story. This is also a location where I insert some reciprocal stories about my own life and Queer experiences and discuss the ways in which my “professional” voice may differ from how we normally speak to each other. This is not to curb their authentic voice; it is the opposite in fact. While I must follow certain guidelines around professionalism, they should remain as honest in their presentation as they feel comfortable doing.

To be honest, this process was just as much for me as it was for the narrator. I would become overwhelmed by all the information I would learn in one sitting. The laughter, tears, and tension we would sit with as I rapid fire asked them to conceptualize their queer existences in the space of one and a half to two hours was overwhelming. I was asking them to share things about themselves they were told to keep hidden away. The pre-interview became a place for me to weep and for them to remove a few layers of Okie shame that they had been carrying with their story. It was also a place for us to be free and open with each other. A place for mutual healing.

These early experiences helped me understand how intense Queer Oral History work is on everyone intimately involved. Reading Alan Wong’s article “Listen and Learn: Familiarity and Feeling in the Oral History Interview” in *Oral History Off the Record* helped me understand the importance of the blurry lines of Queer Oral History methodologies. Wong discusses the nuances between “intimate listening” and “difficult listening.” The first is normally reserved for

friends, the latter is often reserved for family.<sup>10</sup> *Intimate listening* is “a way of listening so closely for one’s own story or interests to be reflected that one risks overlooking the *teller’s* truth” while *difficult listening* allows the interviewer the ability to learn a new perspective on their own lived experience through those intimately connected to it. Talking to people has never been an issue for me. Holding space for people to reflect and asking questions is a skillset I have leveraged in many ways over the years, including as a doula, cheese monger, and sexual health advocate and educator. My methodology sits somewhere in between or outside of this binary. Many of the narrators I have worked with are personal friends, peers, or people I have had direct contact with before my graduate work. I knew that I was granted access to privileged and sacred information. Family secrets, if you will.

Those early interviews also helped me understand that as a Queer Oral Historian, I am “not only sharing authority” but am “also sharing [myself]” with the narrator and the historical record. By pretending I am not part of this story, I would be perpetuating the erasure of Queer experiences that fall outside of the norm of “appropriate.”<sup>11</sup> Alessandro Portelli’s “What Makes Oral History Different” taught me that “oral sources are not *objective*. This of course applies to every source, though the holiness of writing often leads us to forget it.”<sup>12</sup> Objectivity is a part of the master’s toolkit and will not be part of liberatory practices.<sup>13</sup> Often, Oral Histories are seen as

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<sup>10</sup> Alan Wong, “Listen and Learn: Familiarity and Feeling in the Oral History Interview,” *Oral History Off the Record*, ed. Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (2013), 97-111, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137339652>, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Wong, 109.

<sup>12</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” *The Oral History Reader* (2015), 68-78, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315671833-11>.

<sup>13</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Masters Tools,” collective liberation, accessed July 3, 2022, [https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Lorde\\_The\\_Masters\\_Tools.pdf](https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Lorde_The_Masters_Tools.pdf).

“Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference -- those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are

supplementary material to the harder primary sources, something Queer people have often not had access to.<sup>14</sup> Queer Academics, including myself, have been told our evidence is not enough. Freund's "Ethics of Silence" grapples with this conundrum, stating "silence is a double-edged sword. It is a symbol and tool of oppression. Those who are silent are so because they have been silenced (oppressed, subjugated, and discriminated against), not because they chose to remain silent."<sup>15</sup> So, in the spirit of Queer resistance, Oral Histories and Queer cultural references will serve as my primary sources whenever possible, only supplemented with mainstream documentation whenever necessary, much like Queer contributions to in the popularized American historical narrative.

Horacio N. Roque Ramirez and Nan Alamilla Boyd's edited anthology *The Practice of Queer Oral History* informs my professional and personal work. Their introductory chapter, "Close Encounters: The Body and Knowledge in Queer Oral History" relies heavily on the "concept of body-based knowing."<sup>16</sup> Working as an oral history interviewer for the Diverse Gender and Sexuality Project with OOHRP has granted me the ability to interview queer people from a variety of generations and experiences. It has been clear that each encounter cannot be situated within the traditional understanding of interviewer/narrator relationships. Ramirez and Boyd say that "oral history collaboration proceeds the contract between narrator and researcher

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Black, who are older -- know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

<sup>14</sup> Lucy Diavolo, "Nazis Destroyed This Amazing LGBTQ Library in Germany," *Teen Vogue* (Teen Vogue, September 20, 2017), <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/lgbtq-institute-in-germany-was-burned-down-by-nazis>.

"Why Queer Archives Are Important: A Study of LGBTQ Life - Google Arts & Culture," Google (Google), accessed July 1, 2022, [https://artsandculture.google.com/story/why-queer-archives-are-important-a-study-of-lgbtq-life/IgUxCMW95\\_E9-Q?hl=en](https://artsandculture.google.com/story/why-queer-archives-are-important-a-study-of-lgbtq-life/IgUxCMW95_E9-Q?hl=en).

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Freund, "Toward an Ethics of Silence? Negotiating off-the-Record Events and Identity in Oral History," *Oral History Off the Record*, n.d., p. 9, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137339652.0022>.

<sup>16</sup> N. Boyd and H. Roque Ramirez, *Bodies of Evidence* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.



[and] often evolves into something more: a bond, friendship, or political commitment.” I can testify to this understanding in my own work, as every narrator I have worked with has taught me something new about the community and myself. We are forever connected.<sup>17</sup> Every interview in the OOHHP collection has a different perspective.<sup>18</sup> Some are profoundly serious and pointed, others experiment in group conversations and specific historical moments. Each of these interviews about Oklahoma queers has given me more of a formal and informal knowing about individual and collective experiences in Oklahoma. Their legacy and voices are woven throughout this work, directly highlighted when appropriate and informing my lens as an Okie queer forever.

As a Millennial Queer historian, I am knowledgeable of the contemporary Queer timeline of milestones, which often differ from mainstream culture. When speaking with Queer elders, sometimes we situate the historical record by pre/post Ellen coming out on national television.<sup>19</sup> I often score points for knowing who the Indigo Girls, Melissa Etheridge, and John Waters are. Or knowing that RuPaul was a club kid before creating Drag Race. These Queer milestones I did not learn through the academy, but instead through fifteen plus years of consuming all the Queer culture I could get my hands on. Thank the gay gods for all the Google searches for Queer themed episodes of popular television series, my early obsession with Elton John and Tracy

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<sup>17</sup> Boyd and Roque Ramírez, 2.

<sup>18</sup> “Oral History - Oklahoma State University–Stillwater,” accessed July 1, 2022, <https://library.okstate.edu/oralhistory/>.

At the time of this research, none of my interviews have been made available online. That is not due to want, but instead due to the time consuming and resource heavy process of making a collection visible. I have currently conducted over 20 interviews with 2SLGBTQIA+ Oklahomans and plan on continuing to deposit more over the next several years. The collection included Two-Spirit Elders, Youth Workers, a Self-Appointed Gay Mayor, as well as local activists.

<sup>19</sup> Riese, “This Is the Real Ellen DeGeneres Story: Remembering ‘The Puppy Episode’ 20 Years Later,” Autostraddle, April 17, 2021, <https://www.autostraddle.com/this-is-the-real-ellen-degeneres-story-377390/>.

Chapman, and my intimate love of Broadway. Recently, while on a trip with Queer academics from all over the country, I was called a” walking Queer cultural encyclopedia” by a twenty-year-old Harvard student. That moment made me realize that while I thought I was behind as a Queer Okie, I was ahead in so many ways. The practice of reading between the lines, uncovering the codes, making assumptions I was never supposed to make, and breaking all the rules was my superpower, something I hope to display through this work.

Our Okie Queer stories are too vast to be held in one thesis. I would never attempt to try to contain them in that way. Here, instead, I utilize the time frames from 1942-1980 and 2016 to the present to discuss Sue’s experiences and legacy. That is not to say that Sue did nothing of substance between 1980 and 2016, in fact, the opposite is true. She spent time healing herself, repairing her relationship with her biological and chosen families, working and organizing in the medical field, falling in love, and helping raise her nieces and nephews. Those stories are for another time. For the purpose of this paper, I want to explore how Sue survived growing up Queer in Oklahoma, how San Francisco changed her forever, and how she found the gumption to start actively fighting again with the rise of Donald Trump. I will also leverage my own lived experiences as a Queer Okie growing up from 1988 to present to create lines of intergenerational understanding, to showcase that even when Queer people are kept separated and contained, we still find our way, often through the same means of our elders. The timeline will not be chronological but instead thematic; like a good lesbian time travel romance novel or an episode of Dr. Who, we will travel through eras with little regard for the rules.<sup>20</sup> This is the second lesson I

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<sup>20</sup> “Why Are There So Many New Books about Time-Travelling Lesbians?” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, August 9, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2019/aug/09/why-are-there-so-many-new-books-about-time-travelling-lesbians>.

have learned from Sue:

*We are as vast and unique as an Oklahoma sunset.*

The more I learned about her life, the more I understood her. Not just as an individual, but as a physical manifestation of the contradictions that Queer people from places like Oklahoma often carry within themselves every day. Queerness is liberating and it subjects us to a variety of traumas. One can have pride in their home and feel limited by it at the same time. You can leave and sometimes you must come back. Liberation requires action and sometimes you must rest. You can be queer just not too loudly. It also showed me that her burden was mine, not because I picked it up but because it is formed in our queer lineage. Breaking cycles of abuse was not just for my biological lines but my queer ones as well. I start here because it is important for me to be in reciprocity with those that have come before me. Those brave individuals who sometimes fiercely and sometimes covertly lived their authentic truths and recorded them in some form for future generations. I start here because this work is personal and there is no way to separate it neatly. Sue is my part of my queer lineage. Her history is mine. The beauty of queerness is that it blurs lines that were never supposed to be there in the first place and opens new avenues for healing. This work is part of that journey for both Sue and me, but also for the next generation of queers from Oklahoma.

### **I Never Thought I Would Have to Convince a Leo to Stand in the Limelight**

It was in my first pre-interview with Sue that she told me about the attack on her and her partner Shirley in San Francisco by the police in 1979. It was also there that I heard the full story of the day Harvey Milk was assassinated and the ways in which it forever changed Sue. In later conversations, we would go on to discuss the death of her dear friend Phil Wiley, a Black, Gay,

HIV+ Tulsa activist. I learned about her attempt at heterosexual marriage and the violence it inflicted on her body. I honestly was speechless for most of the conversation, frantically taking notes and trying to keep my own emotions in check. In that moment I was witness to Sue realizing how important her story was, how much she had to share.

It is important to note that it was not just us having these conversations and building local community that will be highlighted in this work. Sue is a magnet. People love to be in her company. Visitors, volunteers, and staff all wanted to hang when Sue was volunteering. Not only is she hilarious and always up for an adventure, but she is also so warm and a caregiver to anyone who needs it. As a retired nurse, she still carries around a hefty first aid kit and a stethoscope everywhere she goes. She is also a smooth talker and has the best lines I have ever heard. She has never been afraid to talk about her love of women or a good time. The first story she ever told me about San Francisco involved an incident where she got to escort Jane Fonda from the airport to a gay bar in the 1970s as part of her duties as co-chair of the Gay Freedom Day Committee.<sup>21</sup> That alone was epic, but then she told me that she tried to pick her up. While she was unsuccessful, she was proud of herself.

The following pages explore not only Sue's personal history but highlight ways in which her story supports a larger phenomenon of a second Okie migration from Oklahoma to the west coast that took place during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>22</sup> It discusses intergenerational Okie connections to violence against queer bodies and 2SLGBTQIA+ political and community

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<sup>21</sup> David Lopez, "Jane Fonda: An LGBTQ+ Ally before It Was Cool • Instinct Magazine," Instinct Magazine, September 13, 2020, <https://instinctmagazine.com/jane-fonda-an-lgbtq-ally-before-it-was-cool/>. Dan Tracer, "Incredible Clip of Jane Fonda Defending LGBTQ Rights in the '70s Goes Viral," Queerty (Queerty, September 11, 2020), <https://www.queerty.com/incredible-clip-jane-fonda-defending-lgbtq-rights-70s-goes-viral-20200913>.

<sup>22</sup> William H. Mullins, "Okie Migrations," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=OK008>.

organizing. Lastly, it explores the recent phenomenon of reverse coastal migration and Tulsa's position in this new trend. Sue's story is situated between Oklahoma and San Francisco, like many Okies before her and many that will come after her. Through her life experiences and bravery our community has benefited on a local and national level. My hope is that this work will do justice in representing my friend Sue and her tenacity, resilience, and commitment to Gay Liberation from one Okie queer to another while also serving as a road map for present and future generations of Queer Oklahomans to follow to know the legacy that they are a part of.

Anyone who has been to Oklahoma and witnessed one of our sunsets knows the magic that it holds. While not completely quantifiable, it is undeniable. The story of the Okie Queer experience is much like an Oklahoma sunset. Before starting this research, I innately knew our history was special, but I could not quantify it. This work argues that Queer Oklahomans have been leading the way, pushing back, and creating paths for Gay Liberation on a local, state, and national level. That our perspectives, the traumas inflicted on our bodies, and the ways we heal are vital lessons for Queer intergenerational bridge building in Oklahoma and all the way to the coasts and back. While this narrative focuses on Sue as the main constellation in which I situate this history, I hope by the end it becomes clear that Sue is not special. She is part of a much longer lineage of Queer Okie resilience. This work could be argued through the lens of many others: Bruce Geoff, Lynn Riggs, Chelsea Manning, Representative Mauree Turner, Vernon Jones, Phil Wiley, Billy Tipton, or even Arlowe Clementine.

All the individuals listed above have significant Oklahoma roots. Some you may be aware of; others can be located with a quick google search. Oklahoma has produced visionaries, dreamers, and helpers throughout its' history. Often, when I tell people what I do, they are shocked and amazed at how there is enough material to work with in a place like Oklahoma. In

that moment, I take the opportunity to spill some tea about the Oklahoma that is so often hidden, just out of reach. Throughout this work, I will leave some things unsaid. I will leave seeds of information for intrigued individuals to pick up and carry onward. Understanding Queer identity and our ancestral lineage is often shrouded with barriers, stuck in between the lines. This work is as much about connecting to/affirming the ways of learning our history as it is about our history itself. For Queer folks, I hope this method empowers you to nurture the seedlings you find along your journey into something more. For allies and other academics, I hope this method displays what it is like to work to uncover that which has been purposefully hidden, inside and outside of the academy. This work argues that by finding the power in communal experiences, we can heal better and faster, making space for bigger, queerer, Okie dreaming.

### *Framework and Methodology*

My work utilizes queer oral history methodologies, autoethnographic methodologies, trauma-informed practices, shared authority, and intergenerational connection best practices. This framework is an attempt to cause as little harm during the process of holding space for the types of trauma and experiences queer people are often forced to hide away, compartmentalize, or work to forget as methods of survival. The foundations of my work started outside of the academy, as a Queer youth worker and sexual health educator. There I learned that everyone is the best verifier of their individual truth. I learned how to make space for people where they were, which sometimes meant in a stealth way.<sup>23</sup> It was here that I first learned about shared power, holistic

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<sup>23</sup> **Stealth:**

“Adj: Describes a transgender person moving through daily life passing as cisgender. This individual makes a deliberate choice to not disclose to the public their trans identity.”  
Davis, 285.

\*It is important to note that I am “queering” this word to mean underground or confidential. In Red States like Oklahoma, some of the best work resources are quiet and strategic to protect people that need the services.

health practices, and building scaffolding for others to expand from. This work serves as an embodiment of all those lessons, tied together with academic training and sources that were once not available to me, hidden in plain sight. Much like the history of Queer Okies. This narrative should not be viewed as complete, but instead my starting place.

Listing out my methodologies as separate entities feels counterintuitive, I must confess. Queer Theory and Methodologies utilize many of these methods without taking the time to separate them. It is about the boxes we were never meant to fit into being broken down, wherever possible. Judith C. Lapadat defines autoethnography as “an approach to qualitative inquiry in which a researcher recounts a story of [their] own personal experience, coupled with an ethnographic analysis of the cultural context and the implications of that experience.”<sup>24</sup> Autoethnography “addresses a significant ethical challenge that faces...quantitative approaches to inquiry-the issue of representing, speaking for, or appropriating the voice of others... it is reflexive and positions the researcher within the study.”<sup>25</sup> This blurs boundaries, making an autoethnographer “both subject and researcher.”<sup>26</sup>

Stacy Holman Jones and Tony E. Adams address this through the lens of Queer Theory in their article “Autoethnography is a Queer Method.”<sup>27</sup> They argue that:

autoethnography and queer theory share conceptual and purposeful affinities: Both refuse received notions of orthodox methodologies and focus instead of fluidity, intersubjectivity, and responsiveness to particularities. Both refuse to close down inventiveness, refuse static legitimacy. Both embrace an opportunistic stance toward existing and normalizing techniques in qualitative

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<sup>24</sup> Lapadat, Judith C. “Ethics in Autoethnography and Collaborative Autoethnography.” *Qualitative inquiry* 23, no. 8 (2017): 589–603.

<sup>25</sup> Lapadat, 589.

<sup>26</sup> Lapadat, 589.

<sup>27</sup> Tony E. Adams and Stacy Holman Jones, “Autoethnography Is a Queer Method: 13: Queer Methods and Methodologies,” Taylor & Francis (Taylor & Francis, April 15, 2016), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781315603223-13/autoethnography-queer-method-stacy-holman-jones-tony-adams>.

inquiry, choosing to “borrow,” “refashion,” and “retell” methods and theory in inventive ways.<sup>28</sup>

Deciding to use autoethnography was not a hard choice in this case. This project is not just intertwined within my academic work but is also living and breathing in my day to day. As a Queer historian, I believe reciprocity is key to creating trust. It is not a choice to share parts of myself with narrators I work with or with people I encounter in academic and community spaces, it is vital. I wish I could say the choice was not seen as brave or even inappropriate by some in the field of History. Jones and Adam showcase this disconnect by highlighting that “autoethnography and queer theory are both also often criticized for being too much and too little- too much personal mess, too much theoretical jargon, too elitist, too sentimental, too removed, too difficult, too easy, too white, too Western, too colonialist, too indigenous.”<sup>29</sup> Queer academics and theorists know this dance is often tokenizing, traumatic, invalidating, and disheartening but it is necessary. It is necessary because our histories, experiences, and ancestral legacies are important for survival now and in the future.

Sue and I began discussing a series in the Summer of 2021.<sup>30</sup> As stated previously, it took some convincing to get her to sit down with me. Sue is a doer, not a talker. On several occasions, we met with the intention of talking on the record, but Sue insisted on connecting me with others during those sessions instead. That is how her longtime friend Vernon Jones re-entered my life. Without Sue’s distraction that day, I may not have been able to acquire Jones’ personal archive for Oklahoma State University, a collection that is substantial to discussions of Tulsa’s queer

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<sup>28</sup> Adams and Jones, 197.

<sup>29</sup> Adams and Jones, 199.

<sup>30</sup> By the summer of 2022, I have sat down for about 6 hours of formal recorded conversation with Sue, 2 hours with Sue and Vernon together, and have at least 75 hours searching for her name in the record. I anticipate several more hours of interviewing in the Fall of 2022.



history, especially regarding HIV activism. It was connecting with Jones that kick started Sue's willingness to go on the record.<sup>31</sup>

We often met to interview at Vernon's home, as Sue lives in a retirement community and has random visitors show up announced from down the hall—remember, she is a magnet and very popular with her neighbors. Safety reasons are also present, as Sue is not entirely out in her building, due to the conservative nature of most of the other residents. My own outward expression of queerness is something of concern when I visit her at her home. Vernon's house became a hub for us. In 2021, a young queer couple moved in next door, adding more community to our story telling sessions. They were mostly estranged from their biological families and consider Vernon family now. Sue also felt very comfortable there, making it a good place to interview.

My focal-point primary source documentation for this intervention comes from conversations with Sue Davis, through oral history interview sessions with Sue and individuals close to her. Sue's legacy is huge and underrepresented in the historical record. She has a wealth of knowledge to share. More than I will ever be able to uncover. Here I want to note that Sue has been a vital part of my process, even outside of our formal interviews. We have spent many hours together talking about larger themes discussed here. We have spent hours together that were meant for interviewing that ended up going to help someone we care about. While she has been there through this whole process, I kept most of the structure from her until the end. It was not until about a week before I submitted the first draft of this work to my thesis committee that I finally began reading Sue pieces of my writing. When I read my introduction over the phone, she

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<sup>31</sup> Vernon Jones LGBTQ+ Collection, Oklahoma State University Archives, Oklahoma State University Libraries. <https://archivesspace.library.okstate.edu/repositories/3/resources/1568> Accessed July 01, 2022.

was at Shirley's house. She put me on speakerphone, and I read it for them both. Shirley's response was "well, that sounds like Sue for sure." Sue's response was "well damn, you are gonna make my head too big." She was trying to play it off like she was not crying, but I knew she was. I responded, "Good! You deserve to be proud of the life you have lived and the work you have done. You are my hero." I meant that with every fiber of my being.

I utilize stories from my own experience and lens throughout this piece. This is due to my intimate connection to Sue Davis before this project started; many of my own memories in the last six years include her. It is also because intergenerational storytelling is vital to reconnection and healing for Queer Okies. My perspective is key here, as an Okie Queer Millennial who bridges generations that are so vastly different. As a late eighties baby, I was thrown into a world with AIDS tearing my ancestors apart physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I was raised in an Oklahoma where the Oral Roberts University Praying Hands and Guts Church's The Nightmare Horror House were just two of the many reminders that we were being watched by God. I am a decade long community organizer, activist, and artist. I have worked with elders and young people my whole life. It started in the church nursery and on nursing home field trips in elementary school. While so many of my friends were scared to be in the presence of older folks, I loved it. I loved their stories. I have spent my professional life bringing Queer history to young people who have no concept of what came before. Even when they do know the facts, they cannot fathom the reality of it. This work utilizes what I know to be true about telling Queer stories authentically. About getting vital and lifesaving information out to the people that need it most. While this is written inside the academy, it is not intended to stay within its walls.

Other primary sources for this work come from a variety of places, some unexpected. It includes primary source material found on eBay, in blog posts, and Gay Bay Area Newspapers. It

relies heavily on the GLBT Historical Society's collection on Lesbians Against Police Violence (LAPV) to conceptualize the ways in which Sue and Shirley's attack pivoted the movement against Police Violence in San Francisco. While scholarship has utilized LAPV's archival collection, this is the first scholarship that focuses on Sue and Shirley's experience. I also use *The Queen's English* by Chloe O Davis to define terms that cisgender and straight individuals may not be familiar with.<sup>32</sup> Queer Popular Culture references are also sprinkled throughout as part of my commitment to "queering" source material, something queer people have been doing for generations and that is vital to the work of scholars like J. Halberstam, whose work including *The Queer Art of Failure* is vital to my work and understanding of accessible scholarship.<sup>33</sup> These too serve as primary sources.

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<sup>32</sup> This seems like a good place to introduce the use of Chloe E. Davis' *The Queens' English: The LGBTQIA+ Dictionary of Lingo and Colloquial Phrases*. This extensive 300+ page dictionary not only creates an attempt at standardized space for Queer language. It is super detailed, provides extra context and historical analysis of words as well as addresses places in which Queer language has appropriated from BIPOC communities.

I had the privilege of attending an online event she spoke at through Fulton Street Books in Tulsa. It was wonderful to understand her vision and discuss the many ways this text can be used. This work is a labor of over a decade, and it is so helpful for community organizers, trainers, and academics to help educate people about queer culture and language. I will define some terms that will be utilized throughout and discuss a few of my decisions around the use of queer conversational language tactics.

**Queer:**

"Adj: An umbrella term describing anyone who identifies as something other than heterosexual and/or cisgender."

"Noun: A queer person"

"Verb: To make something queer; to analyze, deconstruct, and challenge thoughts or ideas rooted in heteronormativity." (Davis, 256)

\*A note on Queer/queer. I will use these interchangeably, as well as different forms of the acronym (GLBT, LGBT, LGBTQIA+, 2SLGBTQIA+) throughout. This is an intentional act on my part. Because of disjointed Queer communication from one city, state, or region to another there is a serious discrepancy around the language used based on access to resource, educational, and social Queer spaces. I want every queer person who reads this work to see a form of our language displayed that they understand. Also, it is the way our conversations go. It changes based on our audience, the trust level within it, and how much emotional labor we have to explain ourselves to outsiders.

<sup>33</sup> J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

### **Secondary Scholarship: *Everything Everywhere All at Once***

Secondary scholarship used in this thesis includes queer academics from a variety of fields, as queer academic work must be interdisciplinary due to limited source material and the nuanced nature of living in a queer body. As a queer academic, I often search deeper and longer for source materials due to homophobia and state sanctioned violence against queer bodies in the past and present that worked to hide our narratives and squash our pride. Even in the year 2022, there are people who do not believe that queerness is natural or biologically sound. My sources come from queer historians, cultural geographers, gender studies scholars, sociologists, religious scholars, and community members. This interdisciplinary approach allows for collaboration and resourcefulness, a legacy passed down from queer ancestors.

My work builds on that legacy to record our history and experiences in authentic ways without shame or fear of retribution from those outside of our community. In queer academia, scholars often come to the work through unconventional means. Many of the prominent voices in the conversation centered their lived experience and utilized their external skillsets to make space for queer history narratives to be preserved and provided historical analysis to recognize our existence written in between the lines of mainstream cultural narratives. This differs from mainstream western history practices, which has traditionally prioritized systems of power and majority voice and opinion as the norm. Before there was access inside the academy, queer people took it upon themselves to record their existence through other means. Memoirs, literature, art, film, music, and other forms of Queer coded cultural references can be found throughout modern history, and the existence of Queer people throughout broader human history is

undeniable.<sup>34</sup>

My personal Queer cultural lens comes from late 1980s to contemporary mostly. The use of satire and vulgarity is a Queer trait passed down through generations. Filmmakers like Jamie Babbit and John Waters inspire me to tell real stories with as much camp as possible. The first academic conference presentation I ever did utilized Rebecca Sugar's *Steven Universe* to teach lessons in Feminist and Womanist Theory in 2018.<sup>35</sup> It was Cheryl Dune's *The Watermelon Woman* that first showed me the power of Queer people telling our own stories. Lastly, I truly may not be alive today without Tracy Chapman. I know that sounds extreme, but "Fast Car" has been with me since I was sixteen years old. The first time I was kicked out of my hostile evangelical home, I put some clothes in my car and went driving in my green, rusty, Mazda 626. I drove down Pine Street and over Tiger Switch Road in Catoosa, Oklahoma for hours crying and listening to Tracy Chapman. I did not know then how many times I would have to start over

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<sup>34</sup> Heather Hogan, "Muna and Phoebe Bridgers Pay Tribute to 'but I'm a Cheerleader' in 'Silk Chiffon,'" Autostraddle, September 9, 2021, <https://www.autostraddle.com/muna-and-phoebe-bridgers-pay-tribute-to-but-im-a-cheerleader-in-silk-chiffon/>.

Trish Bendix, "How Tracy Chapman's 'Fast Car' Became a Lesbian Anthem," INTO, June 30, 2022, <https://www.intomore.com/culture/how-tracy-chapmans-fast-car-became-a-lesbian-anthem/>.

Guo-Sheng Liu, "Steven Universe: A Model of Queer Representation," The Oxford Student, January 11, 2019, <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2019/01/11/steven-universe-a-model-of-queer-representation/>.

James Michael Nichols, "The Baby-Sitters Club Author Is Queer and Now Our Childhoods Make Sense," HuffPost (HuffPost, September 8, 2016), [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/baby-sitters-club-author\\_n\\_57d02ecde4b03d2d459797c1](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/baby-sitters-club-author_n_57d02ecde4b03d2d459797c1).

Moira Donegan, "The Watermelon Woman Shows the Power of Gay History," The New Republic, July 3, 2022, <https://newrepublic.com/article/143703/watermelon-woman-shows-power-gay-history>.

Connie Cronley, "The Lost and Found Lynn Riggs," Sooner Magazine, November 22, 2021, <https://sooneromag.oufoundation.org/stories/the-lost-and-found-lynn-riggs>.

Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

<sup>35</sup> In 2018, I was accepted to present at the International Women and Gender Studies Conference held at the University of Central Oklahoma. That conference was the first place I met peers from around the world that utilized popular culture in their work. In 2021, I went back and presented on Sue and Vernon. That year, David Macy opened the conference. Sitting with my friends Katanna Davis and Savannah Bronson-Waters, I began crying. This time, I was presenting as Arlowe, the most authentic version of myself. Dr Macy was bearing witness to me in two of the most vulnerable transitions of my queer adulthood. This sort of full circle moment does not happen often, so I wanted to hold space for it here.

because of who I was or who I chose to love, but I knew these lyrics:

“You got a fast car,  
I want a ticket to anywhere,  
Maybe we could make a deal,  
Maybe together we could get somewhere.”<sup>36</sup>

It is important to note before moving on that I am a white Queer person who was raised in a mostly white, poor, working-class, evangelical family. This perspective created limitations for me in many ways, including with cultural references.<sup>37</sup> While I am utilizing a multitude of Queer references, I understand that the scope of references and individuals I can call upon are just a tiny fraction of what is worth remembering and holding space for in our cultural history. So often, the most impactful moments of our collective past may never be formally remembered, but their visibility and resistance mattered then, and we can still celebrate it now. This burden of being visible was and is still often left to queer people of color and femmes who could not be afforded the luxury of assimilation into a heteronormative, white, male-dominated society.<sup>38</sup> Individuals like Ma Rainey, Bayard Rustin, James Baldwin, Octavia Butler, and Audre Lorde are a few examples of the legacy of Black Queer people imagining liberation for all, not just some of

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<sup>36</sup> “Tracy Chapman – Fast Car Lyrics,” Genius, accessed July 5, 2022, <https://genius.com/Tracy-chapman-fast-car-lyrics>.

Rachel, “Songs to Make You Cry in the Grocery Store, as Ranked Compared to ‘Fast Car,’” Autostraddle, April 3, 2019, <https://www.autostraddle.com/songs-to-make-you-cry-in-the-grocery-store-as-ranked-compared-to-fast-car/>.

<sup>37</sup> I did not see an episode of the Simpsons until I was in college, thought Chilis was eating somewhere super nice, and grew up legitimately not knowing you could make cookies from scratch due to the nature of the food we consumed as a food and resource insecure family.

<sup>38</sup> **Femme:**

Adj: “Denoting the vast and dynamic representation of feminine characteristics, regardless of gender. Both “femme” and “butch” are often paired with adjectives soft/hard or high/low as a means of distinction.” Davis, 118.

**Heteronormativity:**

Adj: “A belief that people are given specific gendered roles within a societal binary and that these roles, along with heterosexuality, are automatically assumed as the norm.” Davis, 158.

us. This is still the case today, with inequalities in academic, medical spaces, and within modern activist movements still perpetuating white supremacy explicitly and implicitly.<sup>39</sup>

To situate this within the larger queer historical context, it is important to discuss foundational texts within formal scholarship. Most of the early *recognized* texts were created by cisgender, white, gay men and occasionally lesbian women with access to the academy or other forms of privileged access like journalist investigations. Gay men were also given more freedom in the early twentieth century through the 1950s than their lesbian and transgender peers, as patriarchal power allowed certain freedoms not available outside of the male gender. Most of these early works are in the form of anthologies or broad stroke narratives. Their work was vital to progressing the conversation and making space for others to expand upon within the academic arena.

Notable works include *Gay American History: Lesbian and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* published in 1976 by historian Johnathan Ned Katz, *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, an edited volume by Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey (1992), as well as *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* by John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman (1998). Queer Oral History methodology was also introduced during this period, with Eric Marcus’ *Making History: The Struggle for Gay & Lesbian Equal Rights, 1945-*

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<sup>39</sup> Linn Jennings et al., “Inequalities in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Health and Health Care Access and Utilization in Wisconsin,” *Preventive Medicine Reports* 14, (2019): 100864, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2019.100864>.

Karim Boustani and Kirk A. Taylor, “Navigating LGBTQ+ Discrimination in Academia: Where Do We Go from Here?” *The Biochemist* 42, no. 3 (September 2020): 16-20, <https://doi.org/10.1042/bio20200024>.

Joel Mittleman, “Intersecting the Academic Gender Gap: The Education of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual America,” *American Sociological Review* 87, no. 2 (2022): 303-335, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00031224221075776>.

1990 published in 1993.<sup>40</sup> All these texts have the commonality of understanding the urgency of compiling queer stories proving we have existed in modern society. These scholars laid the groundwork for more nuanced scholarship regarding the history of queer people in America and worked with scarce source material, often salvaged by community members, not within formalized records.

While early trends in scholarship focused on broad understandings of sexual and gender minorities in the U.S., the next wave brings in more specialized looks at certain identities within the movement. George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World* provided exemplifies an early gay historical monograph. William G. Hawkeswood's *One of the Children: Gay Black Men in Harlem*, published in 1991, featured the first in-depth look at Gay Black men's contribution to larger cultural movements and begins to look at the ways in which queer people of color are double-marginalized within society. Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1984) and Lillian Faderman's work *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in the Twentieth Century* (1991) bring lesbian experiences to the forefront. *A Transgender History* by Susan Stryker (2008) paved the way for Transgender historical scholarship to form.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.: A Documentary Anthology* (New York: Crowell, 1976).

Martin B. Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, *Hidden from History* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

Eric Marcus, *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights, 1945-1990: An Oral History* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).

<sup>41</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

William G. Hawkeswood and Alex W. Costley, *One of the Children: Gay Black Men in Harlem* (University of California Press, 1995).



Oral history methodologies have been vital to the preservation of queer historical narratives. While Eric Marcus was one of the first to utilize the formalized method, queer people have been passing down their stories for generations, as word of mouth was safer than written documentation for much of the twentieth century. These methodologies are especially vital when dealing with further marginalized members of the queer community. *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* (2012) was the first to document and theorize queer history methodology as its own framework. This edited anthology by Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Rouque Ramirez provides the framework in which I work today, as a Queer Oral Historian. While *Bodies of Evidence* documented the framework formalized by the decades of work by Queer Oral Historians to reimagine the ways in which we remember, use of the practice has been heavily leveraged for much longer.

For example, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (1994) from Elizabeth Lipovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis highlights a lesbian community through the 1930s-1960s in Buffalo, NY. Susan E. Johnson's 1996 *Lesbian Sex: An Oral History* was the first to center lesbian sexuality practices. *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society* (1997) by Aaron H. Devor highlighted the lived experiences of transmen in a formal way for the first time. In 2018, E. Patrick Johnson published *Black. Queer. Southern. Women: An Oral History* and Anne Balay published *Semi Queer: Inside the World of Gay, Trans, and Black Truck*

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Audre Lorde, "Sister Outsider," accessed July 4, 2022, [https://rhinehartibenglish.weebly.com/uploads/2/2/1/0/22108252/sister\\_outsider\\_audrey\\_lorde\\_ib\\_pdf\\_packet.pdf](https://rhinehartibenglish.weebly.com/uploads/2/2/1/0/22108252/sister_outsider_audrey_lorde_ib_pdf_packet.pdf).

Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1992).

Susan Stryker, *A Transgender History* (Avalon Pub. Group, 2008).

*Drivers*.<sup>42</sup> Queer people inside and outside of academia are using these methods and expanding upon them to spread knowledge of our histories. This can be seen in works like Meg Barker's 2016 *Queer: A Graphic History* and Syan Rose's 2021 release *Our Work is Everywhere: An Illustrated Oral History of Queer and Trans Resistance*.<sup>43</sup>

This work is focused within two different regional understandings of queer history. In situating Oklahoma queer experiences within the larger context of queer history, I rely on scholarship that discusses the nuances of queer regionality. It is not hard to fathom that growing up queer in the Heartland/Midwest/Bible Belt can be very different than the experience on the coast.<sup>44</sup> While many consider this area fly over country, those of us here know that there is rich and traumatic history here. Time moves differently, affirming resources are scarce. Bernadette Barton's *Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays* (2012) situates the real religious pressures that surround queer individuals living in the Bible Belt.<sup>45</sup> *Oklahomo* by Carol Mason establishes that Oklahoma politics and conservative tactics have been crucial to the oppression of LGBT people in the heartland.<sup>46</sup> Not much outside of *Oklahomo* has been written

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<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

Susan E. Johnson, *Lesbian Sex: An Oral History* (Tallahassee, FL: Naiad Press, 1996).

Holly Devor, *FTM Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1997).

E. Patrick Johnson, *Black. Queer. Southern. Women: An Oral History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

Anne Balay, *Semi Queer: Stories of Trans, Gay, and Black Truck Drivers* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

<sup>43</sup> Meg-John Barker and Jules Scheele, *Queer: A Graphic History* (London: Icon Books, 2016).

Syan Rose et al., *Our Work Is Everywhere: An Illustrated Oral History of Queer & Trans Resistance* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2021).

<sup>44</sup> Stanley D. Brunn, Gerald R. Webster, and J. Clark Archer, "The Bible Belt in a Changing South: Shrinking, Relocating, and Multiple Buckles," *Southeastern Geographer* 51, no. 4 (2011): 513-549, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sgo.2011.0040>.

<sup>45</sup> Bernadette C. Barton, *Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

<sup>46</sup> Carol Mason, *Oklahomo* (State Univ Of New York Pr, 2016).

about the queer experience in Oklahoma on a large scale. Articles do exist, but they are few and often focus on the experience of gay men in the state.<sup>47</sup> It is not surprising that most of the established scholarship centers the harm that has been afflicted on queer bodies by systems of power in the region to repress our existence or the things we have had to overcome to survive. I hope that this adds not only to this legacy of work, but also centers ways in which we have pushed back. The ways in which we leveraged our Okie existence and experiences to inform our work and lives.

While access to midwestern narratives may be limited, coastal understandings of coastal experiences during the twentieth century have been better documented and preserved. Places like Los Angeles, New York City, and San Francisco are considered pillars in Queer Liberation, archival preservation, and history. While many of these pillar cities were doing similar things at similar times, I chose to only reference San Francisco's history during Sue's time there, as her perspective was formed from that community and work. When looking at San Francisco, I rely on *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (2005) by Nan Alamilla Boyd, and *The Mayor of Castro Street* (1982) by Randy Shilts.<sup>48</sup> The GLBT's Historical Society's online exhibit *Labor of Love: The Birth of San Francisco Pride 1970-1980* provides details of the Gay Freedom Day committee's history and provides context to the work being done on the

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<sup>47</sup> Aaron Lee Bachhofer II, "The emergence and evolution of the gay and bisexual male subculture in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1889–2005," dissertation (Oklahoma State University, 2006).  
R.D. Hubach, J. Currin, Z. Giano, H.J. Meyers, K.R., DeBoy, D.L. Wheeler, & J.M. Croff, "Experiences of Stigma by Gay and Bisexual Men in Rural Oklahoma," *Health Equity*, 3, no. 1 (2019): 231-237.

<sup>48</sup> Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).  
Randy Shilts, "Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk," in *Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (S.l.: Atlantic Books, 2022), xiv.

ground during that period.<sup>49</sup> All these sources help situate how San Francisco became the place it did, for Sue and others like her.

For scholarship pertaining to community formation and political action I utilize scholarship from a variety of sources. *Safe Space: A Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* by Christina Hardhart and “Mapping Lesbian and Queer Lines of Desire: Constellations of Queer Urban Space” by Jen Jack Giesecking serve as understandings about the methods and reasons queer communities have formed in the US. *Lavender And Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* by Emily K Hobson and CJ Janovy’s *No Place Like Home: Lessons in Activism from LGBT Kansas* serve as an exemplification of leftist political organizing on a coastal and midwestern level.<sup>50</sup>

Unpacked in this work is also the history of violence against queer bodies throughout contemporary American history. While there are many avenues of violence that I could have started with, this work utilizes Ann Cvetkovich’s *An Archive of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* as my main entry point into queer trauma studies.<sup>51</sup> When looking at state sanctioned violence, Margot Canaday’s *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* and Doug Meyer’s *Violence Against Queer People: Race, Class, Gender, and the Persistence of Anti-LGBT Discrimination* (2015) are situated alongside primary

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<sup>49</sup> Gerard Koskovich, Don Romesburg, and Amy Sueyoshi, “Online Exhibition - Labor of Love,” GLBT Historical Society, accessed July 5, 2022, <https://www.glbthistory.org/labor-of-love>.

<sup>50</sup> E. Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

C. J. Janovy, *No Place like Home: Lessons in Activism from LGBT Kansas* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2018).

<sup>51</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

sources to further the discussion of systemic oppression.<sup>52</sup> Situating the conversation around intergenerational queer trauma, Rachel Gelfand's 2018 Doctoral thesis "Nobody's Baby: Queer Intergenerational Thinking Across Oral History, Archives, and Visual Culture" is leveraged to showcase the nuanced ways in which intergenerational queer trauma manifests.<sup>53</sup> It is important to note that while I have selected books that specifically call and build arguments around trauma and state sanctioned violence, these themes permeate every text I have read regarding queer history.

Queer methodologies are inherently complex to the non-Queer eye because queer existence is complex and hard to understand for folks that do not share our identities. Throughout this work, I rely on J. Halberstam's scholarship and methodology found in *The Queer Art of Failure*.<sup>54</sup> Halberstam understands that queer narratives cannot nor should not be viewed through mainstream societies version of success. Accessibility of information through simple language and popular culture references, which Halberstam refers to as "low-theory," is vital to my own methodology and will be centered in the second part of this work. Language standardization of things like the 2SLGBTQIA+ acronym will not be centered in this work, because queer terminology is always evolving. Umbrella terms like "Gay" and "Queer" will be used interchangeably in this work.

Here, I tie a nationally known understanding of gay liberation experiences in San Francisco to a local Oklahoma experience. While their trajectories take different arcs, both arcs

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<sup>52</sup> Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Doug Meyer, *Violence against Queer People: Race, Class, Gender, and the Persistence of Anti-LGBT Discrimination* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

<sup>53</sup>Rachel Gelfand, "Nobody's Baby Queer Intergenerational Thinking Across Oral History, Archives, and Visual Culture," ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Halberstam, 2012.

are vital to understanding the continued fight towards liberation today. Katie Batza discusses the nuances found from community to community in her book *Before AIDS: Gay Health Politics in the 1970s*, in which that she argues “the gay liberation movement is at once a cacophony of local politics, an ethos, a way of being that has gained much greater imagined clarity, uniformity, and power...this more dynamic, locally grounded understanding of gay liberation also allows for a decentering of gay liberation in the historical origins of services and institutions.”<sup>55</sup> Sue is my main historical thread running through this work, but I reference others to remind the reader that Sue is not alone in this work and that there are many other queer Oklahomans who have and are organizing here.

***WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE WILL HAPPEN AGAIN: A STORY IN THREE PARTS***

In all honesty, one of the hardest parts about this project was figuring out how to tell this story. There are so many elements to uncover here, so many experiences to hold space for. Both lost and found community. Violence has unquestionably been perpetrated against Sue’s body and bodies like hers for sure, but liberation and healing are also present and should be celebrated. These complexities deserve some space to process separately, something I will attempt to do here. Often as Queer people, we must compartmentalize to survive; in a way, I hope this intentional separation helps others understand why we keep fighting to be ourselves. Why we chose to not assimilate into a heterosexual, cisgender, patriarchal understanding of existence. It is the moments of joy and promise of what could be that keep us going.

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<sup>55</sup>Katie Batza, *Before AIDS: Gay Health Politics in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 39.

In **Part One**, I will discuss the multiple forms of violence perpetrated against queer bodies by calling out the main systems of power that are leveraged to harm us, past and present. Sue's story touches on all the forms discussed: violence from the state, violence through religion, familial violence, and intercommunal violence or intimate partner violence. The harm caused to Sue, me, and other Okie Queers may never be fully realized, but remembering is part of the journey to healing and change. This part will rely heavily on primary and secondary source material, as the history of trauma inflicted on Queer bodies is much easier to find and cite. It is parts that are not easily erased. A sign of what has and can happen to Queer people who are blazon enough to thrive in their Queerness, even when there are known consequences.

**Part Two** will look at the joy and movements of liberation from Sue's life and a few folks close to her. Together we will explore themes of queer visibility, freedom, leadership, love, humor, celebration, reconnection, and queer familial creation. Sue's story is just as full as light as it is pain. It is important to note here that these experiences are not always linear. The joy shows up in unexpected places and violence seeps into movements of celebration. As I explore these perspectives, I follow in the footsteps of one of my most beloved Queer theorists, J. Halberstam and things will get a bit timey-wimey, a little blurry.<sup>56</sup> In this section, I rely on just two secondary

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<sup>56</sup> Theorist J. Halberstam broke my brain when I first read their book *Female Masculinities* in my early twenties. Their active academic and community-based work has been a staple for my personal life, and I am proud to be citing their theories here. While I will only be using one of their texts for this work, I encourage everyone who loves a little chaos, brain breaking, and empowerment to speak the truth to read their other works. They dream of a new reality and see that in action when in queer community as exemplified below from *The Queer Art of Failure*.

J Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

“The dream of an alternative way of being is often confused with utopian thinking and then dismissed as naïve, simplistic, or a blatant misunderstanding of the nature of power in modernity. And yet the possibility of other forms of being, other forms of knowing, a world with different sites for justice and injustice, a

sources. J. Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure* and Jen Jack Geiseking's "Mapping Lesbian and Queer Lines of Desire: Constellations of Queer Urban Space."<sup>57</sup> These two texts coupled with the *bodily-knowing* described in *Bodies of Evidence* light my path like the constellations in the night sky.<sup>58</sup> Part Two is a celebration, a Pride celebration of sorts.

**Part Three** serves as a space to discuss the present state of queer existence in the state, and the ways in which Sue's legacy has and will continue to inform generations of queer folks within and outside of the academy. Recently, there has been an influx of younger generations of 2SLGBTQIA+ people moving to progressive hubs in the Midwest with the support of philanthropic programs that incentivize relocation through living stipends and other resources. Tulsa is one of those hubs. In the last few years, I have witnessed a huge influx of Queer individuals moving here and working to make more Queer community spaces. <sup>59</sup> As new generations of coastal queers move into the area, preserving the past and providing support for the Queer community rooted here must take priority if this place and other midwestern places like it want to keep growing and thriving. I argue that Sue Davis' story must be one of them.

The ramifications of hiding this history any further will perpetuate more harm. As I write this, Oklahoma is sitting in one of the worst legislative sessions on record for Queer people,

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mode of being where the emphasis falls less on money and work and competition and more on cooperation, trade, and sharing animates all kinds of knowledge projects and should not be dismissed as irrelevant or naïve." (52)

<sup>57</sup> Halberstam, 2012.

Jen Jack Geiseking, "Mapping Lesbian and Queer Lines of Desire: Constellations of Queer Urban Space," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38, no. 5 (October 2020): 941–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775820926513>.

<sup>58</sup> Boyd and Roque Ramirez, 1. They argue that *bodily-knowing* as a "concept asserts that the sexuality of the body (or bodily desires) is an important, indeed material, aspect of the practices of doing oral history work."

<sup>59</sup> "What Is the Tulsa Remote Program?," Citizen Remote, February 3, 2022, <https://citizenremote.com/domestic-programs/tulsa-remote/>.



especially trans and Queer people of color.<sup>60</sup> That same legislature also holds the first nonbinary state house representative in the United States, Mauree Turner, in its chamber.<sup>61</sup> Contradictions like this are all through our history. While greater society sees Oklahoma as just a conservative state lost in time to the frontier narrative, queer Okies know that some of the most innovative community organizing happens on the ground in places like ours, where the stakes around survival are often harder than our peers in more progressive environments. This serves as just one perspective of those experiences and what can be learned from them.

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<sup>60</sup> Carmen Forman, “Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt to decide on bill to ban transgender athletes from female sports,” *The Oklahoman* (24 March 2022), published online <https://www.oklahoman.com/story/news/2022/03/24/transgender-athletes-bill-goes-oklahoma-governor-kevin-stitt-lgbtq-republican/7151856001/>.

<sup>61</sup> Mauree Turner, “Mauree Turner,” 2022, <https://www.maureeturner.com/>.

## CHAPTER II

### PART ONE: THE TRAUMA OF IT ALL

***“How are you supposed to be believed about the harm that you experience when people don’t even believe that you exist?”***

Genderqueer theorist and poet Alok Vaid-Menon posed this question in their book, *Beyond the Gender Binary*.<sup>1</sup> Published in 2020, this small pocketbook works to make visible the experiences of nonbinary and queer individuals. Alok, like so many that came before them, have made it their mission to speak truth about the queer experience, both the violence perpetrated against us and the ways in which we seek liberation with every breath we take. The message shared in *Beyond the Gender Binary* is not new information to those living within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community but instead a means to recover the active harm and erasure of our history and experiences enacted by the state, our communities, religious affiliations, family structures, and sometimes even our own people. Their message is clear: We exist. We have always existed. We are bridgebuilders and physical manifestations of liberation and autonomy. Queerness is squashed in our society to maintain heteronormative, patriarchal, and white

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<sup>1</sup> Alok Vaid-Menon, *Beyond the Gender Binary* (New York: Penguin Workshop, 2020).

supremacist standards. Often this is done through violent means. Physical violence is ever present, but many other types of violence are employed, including but not limited to mental, emotional, spiritual, legal, medical, familial, and intimate partner violence. Doug Meyer addresses this in *Violence Against Queer People*. He states that “many LGBT people’s violent experiences are considerably more complex than simply reflecting homophobia. Lesbians encountered forms of violence that were simultaneously sexist and homophobic, facing suggestions that butch lesbians had “converted” feminine women into homosexuality.”<sup>1</sup> Sue Davis serves as a reminder of our existence, a glimpse into the ways in which violent tactics used against us have shifted over time, but still harm our bodies all the same.

Sociologists and Public Health Scholars M. Kelly, A. Libitow, M. Towne, and A. Mercier “seek to understand how collective trauma can be inflicted not only from actors external to the community, but how the source of a collective trauma may be situated within the group itself” in their article “*Collective Trauma in Queer Communities*.”<sup>2</sup> Their Portland-based study found that, “for queer communities, collective trauma is complex and multifaceted and identifying intragroup traumas may be highly relevant to more fully understanding community dynamics.”<sup>3</sup> They argue that discussions of trauma by queer people are “most likely to include events that had happened in [our] lifetimes, rather than memories of events passed down intergenerationally.”<sup>4</sup> They offer three main reasons for this: “queer people do not often have other queer people in their families of origin, there is a lack of intergenerational relationships, and there is a lack of queer spaces.”<sup>5</sup> I would argue that there are even fewer of these connections available to Okie Queers than

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<sup>1</sup> Meyer, 143.

<sup>2</sup> Maura Kelly et al., “Collective Trauma in Queer Communities,” *Sexuality & Culture* 24, no. 5 (2020): 1522-1543, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09710-y>.

<sup>3</sup> Kelly et al., 1523.

<sup>4</sup> Kelly et al., 1539.

<sup>5</sup> Kelly et al., 1539.

Portland ones. Part One is my attempt at telling a more holistic story of the trauma inflicted on Sue's body and the ways in which her story has helped heal mine in the process.

In the following pages, I explore modern historical conversations concerning violence against the queer body and provide details from Sue's history to showcase the ways that these understandings of violence manifested in her story. As a queer historian, I argue that due to the treatment of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals in American society in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, all queer historical texts about our modern history touch on harm forced upon us due to our identities. Even when joy and intimacy are centered, the real fear of punishment and/or violence is always present. This is due to discriminatory laws against queer individuals since the beginning of colonial control of the area we now call the United States. As I write these pages, there are over sixteen states in the Union that are pushing through "Don't Say Gay" legislation, including my home, Oklahoma.<sup>6</sup>

I have also chosen to focus on texts that center the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ people, post-World War II, as this follows the experiences of Sue's formative years into the present. This decision was made for many reasons. First, while 2SLGBTQIA+ people have always existed in this country, the events that transpired in post-war America, like the Compton Cafeteria Riots and Stonewall made visible to many what was once in the dark.<sup>7</sup> Media coverage acknowledging queer people fighting back against police violence was uncommon or unheard of up to that point. Second, QBIPOC, transgender people, and women have always been at the forefront of queer organizing but have had even less access to legal rights, class and educational privilege, and the preservation of the archival records. Third, Gay Liberation brought new tactics of resistance to

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<sup>6</sup> Trudy Ring, "16 States Pushing 'Don't Say Gay' Bills and Censorship Laws Right Now," *The Advocate*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.advocate.com/law/2022/3/29/16-states-pushing-dont-say-gay-bills-and-censorship-laws-right-now#media-gallery-media-2>.

<sup>7</sup> *Billy Porter Gives a Brief History of Queer Political Action*, *YouTube-Billy Porter Gives a Brief History of Queer Political Action* (them, 2018), <https://youtu.be/XoXH-Yqwyb0>.

the community.<sup>8</sup> Lastly, while many of the oppressive tactics discussed in these texts have been present since the beginning of state and religious sanctioned homophobia and transphobia, the Gay Liberation Movement allowed closeted or questioning queer people to see themselves as not alone, not in need of assimilation into “normal” society, not in need of change.<sup>9</sup>

Violence takes many forms against the queer body, as mentioned above. In the scholarship, several themes emerge. For the purpose of this conversation, I address texts that fall within the following categories: violence from the state, community-based and regional based violence, religious and familial based violence, medical based violence, and interpersonal and/or intimate partner violence. Many of these topics overlap and are inseparable, as tools of systemic oppression often are. I will utilize scholarship from the fields of History, Oral History, American Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Religious Studies, and Sociology as well as popular culture and nontraditional works like podcasts and graphic novels to exemplify community work that also addresses the ways in which violence affects queer people in America. Primary source documentation will come from formal recorded interviews with Sue and people close to her, informal settings where Sue has provided me with further context, and from Bay Area and Oklahoma specific sources.

***“I love a good man outside the law, just as much as I hate a bad man inside the law.”***

***- Woody Guthrie***

Early conversations surrounding violence against queer bodies were often found in large anthologies covering/focusing on queer history and experiences. These texts focused on broad

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<sup>8</sup> Jeff Steen, “Liberation vs. Assimilation: Can the LGBT Community Achieve Both Equality and Cultural Identity?” OUT FRONT, March 29, 2021, <https://www.outfrontmagazine.com/liberation-vs-assimilation-can-the-lgbt-community-achieve-both-equality-and-cultural-identity/>.

<sup>9</sup> Before the era of Stonewall, much of the conversation around queer existence was medicalized and treated as a disorder in need of being corrected. This sentiment is still seen today in the form of conversion therapy and legislative attacks on transgender youth but it is not the only prominent message as it was in the early twentieth century.

strokes of information recovery and relied heavily on wider known people, places, and events, as well as medical and legal battles. This is modeled through works like Michael Bronski's *Queer History of the United States*, Lilian Faderman's *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle*, and Susan Stryker's *A Transgender History*. These texts and scholars implored the use of news headlines, medical journals, personal memoirs, court cases, and queer coded popular culture and literature, as well as lived experience and community knowing to record encyclopedia-like information for future scholars to build on. Acts of violence performed by the state found in these works include mentions of police raids and riots, including during the Harlem Renaissance, Cold War era, and the Civil Rights era up to and after Stonewall. They cover military discrimination, educational discrimination, and legal discrimination that vary over time and by region. While these themes are touched upon, none are given expansive space to be explored fully. One could imagine reasons for this including limited space in the text, money and time constraints for research, access to primary sources, and fear of retaliation from individuals and systems of power. Despite some limitations, these early works laid the foundation for more nuanced scholarship to develop.<sup>10</sup>

Violence executed by the state is the first emerging theme to discuss. In this theme, scholarship focuses on legal, regulatory, and advisory state discrimination against queer bodies. This is due to several reasons including access to public record through the court and other state systems, the explicit nature of state sanctioned violence, multiple public scenarios

of police and state brutality gaining national attention, and the shifting techniques that states have used over time to control queer bodies through legal means of discrimination and violence.

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<sup>10</sup> One thing to note before moving forward is the limitations of exploring this topic chronologically. Time works within a binary that is limited. Many early queer scholars spent years researching for these works. Access to time, financial and institutional support, and proximity to power meant that more nuanced ideas were circulating within the field and community but were not often made publicly accessible.

While most of the texts I will highlight stay within the boundary of time I have set above, one cannot discuss scholarship regarding state violence through regulation without acknowledging Margot Canady's *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth Century America*. Published in 2009, this text was the most comprehensive argument about the state's control of queer bodies through regulation. While only the last chapters deal with the period after Stonewall, Canady's scholarship charts a path for change in regulatory strategy that is often still utilized today. *The Straight State* leverages and explores power held through multiple state programs including immigration policies, military policies, and welfare policies and the ways in which they have privileged heteronormative relationships and denied access to queer people through multiple means. Conversations of legal rights for 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals usually focused on the rights of gay men and lesbians in the early scholarship. While the *Straight State* focused on a broad topic of regulation, *Marriage Equality: From Outlaws to In-Laws* published in 2020 shows the ways in which scholarship has evolved. The book, written by legal scholars William K. Elkrige Jr. and Christopher R. Riano, provides a detailed history of the fight towards marriage equality specifically. While marriage equality has been centered as a major foundational right being fought for by all queer people, folks outside the gay and lesbian umbrellas know that marriage rights are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to state sanctioned rights and protections for 2SLGBTQIA+ people.

Often transgender individuals were left out the general conversation, as their identity brings forth further exposure to violence. Dean Spade's 2011 book, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics and the Limits of the Law*, provided the understanding that state sanctioned violence and discrimination against queer people is deeper than laws that limit our rights to marry and provide protection from hate crimes.<sup>11</sup> He argues that "to properly understand

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<sup>11</sup> Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

power and transphobic harm, we need to shift our focus from the individual rights framing of discrimination and “hate violence” and think more broadly about how gender categories are enforced on all people in ways that have particularly dangerous outcomes for trans people.”<sup>12</sup>

This opens the door for more nuanced conversations about the state’s many methods of harming queer and trans bodies. Scholarship like Susan Gluck Mezey’s *Beyond Marriage: Continuing Battles for LGBT Rights* (2017) furthers the discussion of legal battles for queer rights in the court system, educational system, employment law, and public accommodations.<sup>13</sup>

Moving into even further nuanced conversations, Joey L. Mogul, Andrea J. Ritchie, and Kay Whitlock’s *Queer (In)Justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States* (2011) centers the harm done through policies that lead to an excess of queer people being incarcerated for who they are as well as experiencing further harm inside the carceral system due to their queerness.<sup>14</sup> The authors draw upon state inflicted criminal queer stereotypes to show the depth of criminalization of queer bodies through the legal system as well as villainizing them in mainstream cultural understanding of queerness as illegal and immoral. These forementioned texts are no way exhaustive of the scholarship surrounding 2SLGBTQIA+ and the legal system, but instead show the change in broad stroke recognition of violence against queer bodies to more complex understandings about the state sanctioned system’s deeply embedded homophobia and transphobia.

Queer popular culture projects including podcasts like *Queer Serial* and *Queer America* that highlight guest speakers, historical footage, and other forms of primary source documentation to make the history of violence against queer people and the tactics used more widely accessible

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<sup>12</sup> Spade, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Gluck Mezey, *Beyond Marriage: Continuing Battles for LGBT Rights* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman et Littlefield, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Joey L. Mogul, Andrea J. Ritchie, and Kay Whitlock, *Queer (in)Justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States* (Boston, Mass: Beacon), 1220.



to a general audience.<sup>15</sup> This is also modeled in documentaries like *Paris is Burning* and *Pride* on Hulu.<sup>16</sup>

***“I got started in Oklahoma. That is where I was born...” -Woody Guthrie***

Javana Sue Davis was born July 28th of 1942, at home, in Vianne, Oklahoma to William A. (Bill) and Johnnie Davis.<sup>17</sup> The firstborn child of her mother and third born of her father, Sue was the bridge of this nontraditional 1940s nuclear family structure. Bill was a local iceman when he met Johnnie, but Sue does not know much more about their beginnings. Sue was born into a world of injustice and violence forced upon marginalized bodies. On the day she was born, over 10,000 Jewish prisoners were murdered at the hands of Hitler and the Nazis.<sup>18</sup> By normal standards, Sue’s mother would have found out that she was pregnant around the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor. I wonder what Johnnie felt, knowing she was bringing a new life into the world when so much death was happening around her.

As a Leo, I assume Sue came into the world with a roar.<sup>19</sup> She grew up on the west side of town, brought up in a working-class family, where resources were tight, but they had enough to survive. She comes from a legacy of helpers and organizers. Her late father Bill and late brother Coleman both spent time as leaders for the local Teamster chapter.<sup>20</sup> In one of our

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<sup>15</sup> Devlyn Camp, “Queer Serial: American LGBTQ+ History before Stonewall,” *Queer Serial.*, June 25, 2022, <https://www.mattachinepod.com/podcast>.

John D’Emilio, “Queer America Podcast,” *Learning for Justice*, accessed July 4, 2022, <https://www.learningforjustice.org/podcasts/queer-america>.

<sup>16</sup> *Paris Is Burning* (Off White Productions, Inc., 1990). *Pride* (Hulu, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Sue Davis, interview by Arlowe Clementine, Sept. 19, 2021, interview 1, at Hope Testing, Tulsa, OK.

<sup>18</sup> “Minsk Ghetto,” *Aktion Reinhard Camps*, accessed July 2022, <http://deathcamps.org/occupation/minsk%20ghetto.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Astrology is queer. It is part of our culture and often serves as a placeholder for traditional religious beliefs from those of us that have left the religion of our upbringing. According to Jen Jack Giesekeing “lesbian-queer dedication to astrology, [sic] speaks to the ways of making worlds all at once mythical, imaginary, and physical.” Giesekeing, 943.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Mason, “Coleman Davis, Tulsa Teamster,” *This Land*, last modified February, 6, 2010, <https://thislandpress.com/2010/02/06/colemandavis/#:~:text=With%20his%20tenacity%20and%20stubborn%20demeanor%2C%20C.%20Coleman,Davis%20fought%20for%20the%20rights%20of%20working%20Oklahomans>.

sessions together, she talked to me about vividly remembering helping her father Bill work on the local chapter's office, taking the streetcar with him and his tools to volunteer his time. Her mother did random home related jobs, like childcare, until Sue was around ten. She then worked for St. John Hospital as a chef for the religious staff.<sup>21</sup> Sue beams with pride when she talks about her family contributions, she clearly comes from a lineage of helpers.

It is not surprising that after a severe bout of asthma forced Sue into the hospital at a young age, she came out of the experience certain she wanted to be in the medical field. On a walk around the hospital with her father, they stumbled upon the Polio ward in the basement. Sue faced her peers in iron lungs, and said she was going to dedicate my life to helping others feel better.<sup>22</sup> Listening back to the audio of this conversation, the weight of what Sue saw that day is evident in her tone. Here we find the next lesson I have learned from Sue:

*Even when you are scared, there is work to be done.*



*Senior Yearbook Photo  
Central High Tulsa, Oklahoma  
Photo Courtesy of Sue Davis*

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<sup>21</sup> Sue Davis, interview 1.

<sup>22</sup> Sue Davis, interview 1.

*“If a woman joins the military, she either comes out a whore or a queer.”<sup>23</sup>*

By the time Sue enlisted in the Navy, she had already experienced violence upon her body, something we will discuss in depth in a later section. She was looking for a way out, and the Navy allowed a fresh start. Sue had to overcome her own health limitations and lack of familial support to begin her military career. Training took place in Maryland, at Bethesda Military Hospital.<sup>24</sup> Once Sue was in, she was on her way to leadership, even though she was not interested in the role. Learning that as a company commander, something Sue was voted into by her peers, she could choose her station, Sue agreed. Nursing was already a skill she had; Sue wanted to become an Aviation Photographer. The “Navy’s needs came first,” and Sue was assigned to Great Lakes in the Midwest as a nursing commander instead.<sup>25</sup>

Sue does not like to talk about her time in the military or what she saw in that hospital. Looking in her eyes when she speaks of the soldiers she helped, you can tell she was forever changed by that experience. Sue, along with several others in her unit, were taken in and questioned after being caught at a Civil Rights rally in the area, on their day off. They were accused of being homosexual and were discharged from service. Before her release, Sue was ordered to write a letter home, dictated by her commanding officer, forcing her to come out to her parents. This experience forever changed Sue’s trajectory.

In January of 2018, while on a group trip to Washington, DC, I had the opportunity to visit the National Museum of Health and Medicine with Sue and others on the trip.<sup>26</sup> Getting there

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<sup>23</sup> Sue Davis, interview 1.

<sup>24</sup> “Bethesda Naval Hospital,” Bethesda Historical Society, May 17, 2021, <https://bethesdahistoricalociety.org/bethesda-naval-hospital/>.

<sup>25</sup> Sue Davis, interview 1.

“Great Lakes Training Center Navy Base North Chicago, IL,” Military Bases, January 3, 2018, <https://militarybases.com/illinois/great-lakes/>.

<sup>26</sup> Olivia Lamb, interview by Arlowe Clementine, interview 1, Tulsa, OK.

was such a pain that halfway through the trek there, the group had considered turning around. It was Sue's enthusiasm that kept us on the road. Once we arrived, the overwhelming nature of the museum took over. There were so many things to see and take in. On display was a special military medical equipment exhibit. While the rest of the group meandered around the entirety of the space, Sue sat on a bench in front of the military display for a long time in silence. At one point, I went and sat next to her and asked if she was okay. Her response was, "we lost so many boys... they were just boys." After a while, we got up and walked around some more together. Sometimes I think about that day, and I wonder if I should have said more. If I should have asked her more questions. I had no idea then what I know now about her trajectory and experience with the military. Looking back, her practice of remembering in that moment will forever stay with me. This is the next lesson Sue has taught me:



Naval Nursing Headshot  
Photo Courtesy of Sue Davis

*"Even when it is hard, they deserve to be remembered."*

Violence against queer people and women in the military has been documented through a variety of means.<sup>27</sup> The narrative of queerness in the military has shifted over time and with shifts in cultural understanding. While a huge portion of US American Military history worked to hide the presence of queer men and women in their ranks through discriminatory practices like sexual assault, military discharges, and historical erasure via policy including the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” Queer people have utilized the military to build new futures for themselves or escape harmful environments. Queer legacy can be found throughout military history.<sup>28</sup> The Navy assuming Sue’s sexuality forced Sue to look at it herself, something she did not fully do until the train ride home. She left with the military trauma and stigma and fear of her family’s response and without long term support and benefits from the military, something she surely deserves for her service. The military industrial complex provides one version of state sanctioned violence against Sue’s body; unfortunately, more violence would follow Sue in the form of police violence.

To be honest, there are a multitude of moments from Sue’s story where state violence has intervened explicitly or implicitly. After Sue returned home from the military, she spent a few years back home in Tulsa. She met several of her lifelong friends during this period, including Phillip Wiley and Vernon Jones. While talking about the period between the military and San Francisco, Sue and Vernon discussed the constant fear and threat of being rounded up and arrested for socializing within queer friendly spaces. They discussed having uniform cops in queer establishments, only there to surveille.<sup>29</sup> Enter lesson six here:

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<sup>27</sup> “Coming out in National Security #COINS,” Out in National Security, accessed July 3, 2022, <https://www.outinnationalsecurity.org/coins/>.

Bérubé Allan, John D’Emilio, and Estelle B. Freedman, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> Calum Russell, “Looking Back at Cinema’s First-Ever Gay Kiss with the 1927 Film ‘Wings,’” *Far Out Magazine*, June 7, 2021, <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/first-ever-gay-kiss-1927-film-wings/>.

<sup>29</sup> Sue Davis and Vernon Jones, interview by Arlowe Clementine, Oct. 10, 2021, group interview 1, Vernon Jones’ home, Tulsa, OK.

*“All Cops are Bullies, Antagonizers, unSafe, Arrogant, unTrustworthy, Aggressive, Regressive, Dregs on Society.”*

*Nothing will ever be the same... Losing Harvey, Fighting the Cops, and Burning it Down*

I'll never forget the Summer of 2017. Tensions were high in Tulsa. A few months before, the city had made national news after Police Officer Betty Shelby killed local Black Tulsan Terrance Crutcher.<sup>30</sup> Sue and I, along with some other local queer folks were volunteering at the center when we got the news that another young Black man had lost his life at the hands of the Tulsa Police Department.<sup>31</sup> This tragedy, taking place in the early days of Pride month, brought Sue to action. It was one of the first times I witnessed her organizing skills first-hand.

Joshua Barre was killed in a convenience store at the corner of 46<sup>th</sup> Street North and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. Within an hour of his death, a vigil began to form. Sue started gathering supplies, including a bunch of branded water bottles from OKEQ, and was unbothered when leadership told her that they were saving them for Pride events. She was serious about a public display of support for Barre, his family, and Tulsa's Black community. A group of us stood on the corner with other community members for hours with candles, offering water and holding space for community grief. I had no idea then how many times Sue had personally experienced violence at the hands of the police. How many people she had lost. It would be several more years before I learned about the attack on Sue and her partner Shirley at the hands of the San Francisco Police Department in 1979.

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<sup>30</sup> “Timeline: The Shooting of Terence Crutcher,” Tulsa World, September 14, 2019, [https://tulsaworld.com/news/local/timeline-the-shooting-of-terence-crutcher/collection\\_187d7db2-8734-5f27-9e16-446f87b84208.html#1](https://tulsaworld.com/news/local/timeline-the-shooting-of-terence-crutcher/collection_187d7db2-8734-5f27-9e16-446f87b84208.html#1).

<sup>31</sup> “Shooting of Joshua Barre in Tulsa: The Tulsa World Archive,” Tulsa World, June 9, 2020, [https://tulsaworld.com/news/local/shooting-of-joshua-barre-in-tulsa-the-tulsa-world-archive/collection\\_49d6745c-a171-5e00-9818-4a64b791eabb.html](https://tulsaworld.com/news/local/shooting-of-joshua-barre-in-tulsa-the-tulsa-world-archive/collection_49d6745c-a171-5e00-9818-4a64b791eabb.html).

Sue left San Francisco in 1980 and has only returned one time since. When I asked her why she left, she gave me two reasons: everything felt different after Harvey Milk's assassination, and the long-term exhaustion and harm caused by SFPD's attack on her and Shirley's bodies and the legal fight that followed. She was tired. San Francisco did not feel the same. Even in that conversation, Sue disclosed little about the trauma and violence she faced. Like a good Okie, she downplayed the harm and the impact of the harm inflicted on her.

Like any good researcher, I went down a rabbit hole trying to find out more about the attack in San Francisco.<sup>32</sup> It was not long before I realized the impact this event had in Gay Liberation Work in San Francisco in the late 70s and early 80s. Milk's death, Sue and Shirley's attack, and the White Night Riot showcase events of personal and collective violence against Sue's body. Sue experienced more loss and devastation in the space of 1978-1979 than anyone should ever have to experience in their lifetime.

### *A Quick Note on Harvey Milk*

One of the things I have learned in the process of becoming a Queer historian, is that often, those dubbed heroes in our community would have never wanted the title. They were just doing what was necessary to survive and thrive. While I never had the opportunity to meet Harvey Milk, I can imagine that he may fall into this category. Harvey leveraged what he had and what he knew to get the job done. But he was SO MUCH MORE than a politician. Queer historian Leo Herrera captures another element of Milk's essence in the Instagram post below. He states that Milk was a "goofy loudmouth f\*ggot hippie Daddy with a ponytail and B.D.E."<sup>33</sup> Before discussing the death of Milk, it is important for me to hold space for this part of him, the parts that are often hidden to create narratives that got his face on a postage stamp or a major

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<sup>32</sup> "Meg Barnett Collection of Lesbians Against Police Violence Records," GLBT Historical Society, accessed July 3, 2022, <http://pdf.oac.cdlib.org/pdf/glhs/c8pc32z1.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> Leo Herrera, "Harvey Milk's Navy Thirst Traps," Instagram May 22, 2022, [instagram.com/herrerainages](https://www.instagram.com/herrerainages).

motion picture. There is a rich collection of research done on Milk's life and legacy, while this work only has space for a few pages, there is much more to explore.<sup>34</sup>



Photo Courtesy of Leo Herrera (@herreraimages)

### *Losing Harvey, Losing Hope*

Harvey Milk was a lot of things to a lot of people. He is often held on a high altar of queer heroes. His story even made it to the big screen.<sup>35</sup> I've even heard him referenced as having "Big Dick Energy."<sup>36</sup> He was the one of the first elected gay city officials in the country, solidifying San Francisco as a gay mecca when he was sworn-in to the position of city supervisor in 1977. Sue speaks of him not as a gay god, but as a friend. Someone who was lucky to be

<sup>34</sup> For more perspectives on Harvey Milk, see the following works: Lillian Faderman's "Harvey Milk: His Lives and Death," Cleve Jones' "When We Rise: My Life in the Movement," and "An Archive of Hope: Harvey Milk's Speeches and Writings."

<sup>35</sup> Latifah Muhammad, "Harvey Milk: 8 Movies and Books Celebrating the LGBTQ ICON," *IndieWire* (IndieWire, May 22, 2021), <https://www.indiewire.com/shop/best-lgbtq-books-harvey-milk-1234639497/>.

<sup>36</sup> Leo Herrera, Instagram.



charming and have a good group of organizers behind him, especially women like her who taught him about feminism. She is sure he would have never won his second attempt at becoming an elected official without the lesbian machine behind him. We will never truly know what type of political precedent Milk could have set in San Francisco, because he was dead before the end of 1978. Harvey was assassinated by Dan White (fellow city councilor and ex-SFPD) on a cold November day.

Randy Shilts opens his foreword to the *Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (1982) discussing Harvey's death. Starting there did not surprise me, but his reasons for the lack of lesbian visibility in his narrative did. He states that "the lack of many lesbians in important roles in this book comes from a reality I could not alter as a journalist. Harvey did not have much contact with lesbians either socially or politically."<sup>37</sup> This assumption is wrong, Sue and other lesbians doing the work in 1970s San Francisco could tell you that it was lesbians that actually started the LGBTQ political movement.<sup>38</sup> It does however indicate the ways that mainstream media often only gives us glimpses into the work done by community activists and organizers in Queer Liberation spaces. Harvey would not have succeeded without lesbian support and political strategy. Here is a small glimpse into Sue's connection to Harvey and his death.

Sue hates talking about that day, November 27, 1978, to be exact. If it had been another day, she might have reasonably witnessed the immediate aftermath of his death or at least the body bag he left in. As a major local organizer and co-chair for the Gay Freedom Day parade, they spent a significant amount of time in the same spheres. This day was different because she was flying back from a trip back home to Tulsa for the holiday. Sue was already dealing with the news of the recent Jonestown Massacre, taking people she knew and loved, nine days before

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<sup>37</sup> RANDY SHILTS, "Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk," in *Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (ATLANTIC BOOKS, 1982), xiv.

<sup>38</sup> Julie Compton, "Meet the lesbian who made political history years before Harvey Milk," *NBC News*, last modified April 2, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/meet-lesbian-who-made-political-history-years-harvey-milk-n1174941>.

Harvey's murder.<sup>39</sup> When she got off the plane, "the airport seemed bizarre." It was the cab driver that picked her that told her what had just happened to Milk. She responded by saying "don't take me home, take me downtown."<sup>40</sup> She went straight to the scene, bags still in hand. I can only imagine how she processed it, landing in the city she felt safest in, having just gotten back from the city you had to leave to be able to live as an out lesbian, only to find that it was not the same city you left it as. It was not that this came as a surprise; in fact, "Harvey had always told them it would end this way, with a bullet in the brain."<sup>41</sup> When she talks about that day, she talks about the air leaving the room. She lost a friend and the city full of queer people lost their hope at the hands of an ex-cop and fellow City Supervisor. Sue and others in the city mourned the loss of Milk that night in the form of a candlelight vigil, Sue one of "forty thousand tiny flames quiver[ing] in the night breeze."<sup>42</sup> They held space that evening but kept planning and organizing.

### *A Quick Note on Police Violence in San Francisco*

Sue and Shirley's attack caused a new spark in queer women joining the movement against police violence in the Bay Area. This sort of violence was not uncommon through the twentieth century and it continues today. It's effects harm Queer bodies wherever it occurs. Through a large portion of the twentieth century, just the audacity to exist could put Queer people in harm's way with the police. Changes in laws around sodomy and breaking gender norms allowed individuals to become more public about their identities in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in places like the Castro, a gay hub within the city of San Francisco. While visibility was possible in a new way, it did not mean that the violence and harassment from law

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<sup>39</sup> David Chiu, "Jonestown: 13 Things You Should Know about Cult Massacre," *Rolling Stone* (Rolling Stone, July 5, 2021), <https://www.rollingstone.com/feature/jonestown-13-things-you-should-know-about-cult-massacre-121974/>.

<sup>40</sup> Sue Davis, interview by Arlowe Clementine, Nov. 14, 2021, interview 2, Vernon Jones' home, Tulsa, OK.

<sup>41</sup> Shilts, xv.

<sup>42</sup> Shilts, xvii.

enforcement slowed down. In the early 1970s, white, gay men began working to create protections and friendlier relations with the SFPD. They even began encouraging Gay folks to join the force.

Over Labor Day weekend, 1974, San Francisco police officers conducted an unprovoked sweep of the Castro. They harassed dozens of gay men and arrested fourteen for loitering and “obstructing a sidewalk.” Harvey Milk established a defense fund for the arrested men in his camera store. Gay men with politics ranging from liberal to radical crowded meetings of the local police community relations board, but found their demands stalled when the SFPD prepared to select a conservative gay Republican as community liaison.<sup>43</sup>

Women and transgender members of the community have traditionally had more to lose at the hands of the police. Queer historian Emily Hobson’s *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left*, is a “history of queer radicals who understood their sexual liberation as intertwined with solidarity against imperialism, war, and racism.”<sup>44</sup> Hobson situates LAPV within the broader narrative of queer liberation and argues that while they were ahead of their time in some ways, especially surrounding conversations around compounding marginalized identities, they also recreated some of the white gay victimhood narratives that surrounded the movement at that time. For future reading on violence against lesbians in San Francisco, I highly recommend sociologist Beatrice von Schulthess’ “Hate Crimes: Confronting Violence Against Lesbians in San Francisco.”<sup>45</sup> This valuable study provides quantitative and qualitative data spanning from the 1970s to the early 1990s.

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<sup>43</sup> E. Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left*, (California: University of California Press, 2017).

<sup>44</sup> Hobson, 87.

<sup>45</sup> Beatrice von Schulthess, “Hate Crimes: Confronting Violence Against Lesbians in San Francisco” (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1996), 30.

Von Schulthess' 1996 study provides a glimpse into the state of violence against lesbians in San Francisco. The study highlights that in 1986 alone, "4,946 acts of anti-lesbian/gay violence were reported from across the country," according to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.<sup>46</sup> That year saw twice as many attacks as the year before. The Mayor's Survey of Victims of Violent Personal Crime conducted in San Francisco in 1982 found that "82% of anti-gay attacks were not reported to the police."<sup>47</sup> Von Schulthess explained that "many of those who do report are victimized a second time by the very people and agencies responsible for protecting and assisting them."<sup>48</sup> The police range from "indifferent, hostile, or even physically abusive."<sup>49</sup> In 2022, we are still in the same state of fear as queer people in America. A UCLA Williams Institute report from 2013 found that of the LGBT violence survivors surveyed who interacted with police, 48% reported that they had experienced police misconduct, including unjustified arrest, use of excessive force and entrapment. Additionally, police officers accounted for 6% of all offenders reported by respondents; of offenders who were personally unknown to the victim, police made up 23%.<sup>50</sup>

Before we go any further in this narrative, I want to ground us with the words of Sue and Shirley from after their attack. So often people create excuses for police brutality against BIPOC Queer, Disabled, and Poor bodies. Bad apples are blamed instead of the system. As you read the quote below, take a moment to hold space for the ways in which marginalized folks have been begging for reprieve from this broken system, organizing against it, and physically putting their bodies on the line for the hope of future safety for their communities. Lesbians Against Police

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<sup>46</sup> Von Schulthess, 30.

<sup>47</sup> Von Schulthess, 30.

<sup>48</sup> Von Schulthess, 30.

<sup>49</sup> Von Schulthess, 30.

<sup>50</sup> Christy Mallory, Amira Hasenbush, and Brad Sears, "Discrimination and Harassment by Law Enforcement Officers in the LGBT Community," UCLA School of Law, Williams Institute, March 2015, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/lgbt-discrim-law-enforcement/>.

violence knew that Black Lives Matter and that the police state could never and would never protect us.

**STATEMENT FROM SUE AND SHIRLEY**

This could happen to anyone. We wanted people to know that. A lot of people automatically assume if someone is harassed by the police, it's because they were doing something wrong. We didn't do anything except walk out of a gay bar. That was the sin or illegal act. If we'd been walking out of a place on Nob Hill, it wouldn't have happened. If we'd been absolutely staggering drunk, they would have said, "Where do you ladies live? Can we drive you home?" It depends on where you are, who you are, and what they think they can get away with.

You don't just have to worry about muggers and rapists. You also have to worry about the cops. We realize after our experience that they can get away with murder, because they've got the law on their side. What cop is going to testify against another for harassing somebody? When women wrote letters protesting what had happened to us, uniformed policemen went to their homes to ask them about it.

It's going to cost us at least \$6,000.00 for depositions and court costs, not counting lawyer's fees, but the cops have unlimited public funds at their disposal. They can have as many lawyers and investigators as they want.

We've been having a hard time finding witnesses. We have received little support from the bar owners. We feel that this lack of support is a form of police harassment because in order to run a gay bar, the owners must cooperate with the police. These are the same cops who are picking on the kids in the Mission. Who are the cops protecting? They're protecting rich people and their money.

The women jailers were really bad. To see women treat us like that was really horrible. It's total bullshit, this gay recruitment program. In order to survive in that organization, you can't fight it. If you are going to be a cop, you have to be a cop like they are a cop or you aren't going to make it. They will get rid of you one way or another. They will force you out of the police department if you object.

If one cop had objected to our treatment, I'm sure he would have received the wrath of the others, so I don't think it's going to be one bit of good to put gay people on the force. The peer pressure is so great, that if a gay person wants to stay on, they'll have to conform to the standards of the others.

We wish we had known before. We really had an awakening. We'll probably never be the same again.

Sue and Shirley need people to work on their case, and they need money.  
Sue and Shirley Defense Fund: 1550 24th Avenue, S.F., CA 94122

This leaflet was written by Lesbians Against Police Violence  
P.O. Box 23984, Oakland, CA 94623 Phone 652-3330, ext. 392.

**WHO ARE SUE AND SHIRLEY?**

**WHY WERE THEY ATTACKED BY THE COPS?**

### WHO ARE SUE AND SHIRLEY?

Courtesy of the Meg Barnett LAPC Collection housed at the GLBT Historical Society

"This could happen to anyone. We wanted people to know that...you don't just have to worry about muggers and rapists. You also have to worry about the cops. We realize after our experience that they can get away with murder, because they've got the law on their side..." Sue and Shirley wrote in a joint statement distributed on orange fliers around San Francisco, shown above. They go on to discuss the recent trend of Gay recruitment on the force as a means of stopping violence: "It's total bullshit, this gay recruitment program. In order to survive in that organization, you can't fight it. If you are going to be a cop, you have to be a cop like they are a

cop or you aren't going to make it. They will get rid of you one way or another...we wish we had known before. We really had an awakening. We'll probably never be the same again.”<sup>51</sup>

### *“Shirley We’ll Sue”*

Sue and her partner Shirley Wilson pulled up to San Francisco’s Amelia’s bar, located in the Mission District on Valencia Street, on 21 January 1979. They were headed inside for a meeting regarding the Gay Freedom Day Parade. They never made it to the meeting. Instead, they were beaten up and arrested by the police in the parking lot. Shirley was stripped searched. While this was not the first instance of police violence against queer people in San Francisco, the attack on beloved friends and organizers Sue and Shirley pushed people to act. The short timeline from the death of Milk to the attack on Sue and Shirley may have been a catalyst to what came next.

According to the group’s internal history write up, Lesbians Against Police Violence (LAPV) “began as a meeting called by Lesbian School workers in early February because of an incident at Amelia’s.” They knew that Sue and Shirley had been victimized by the police, stating that “these women were beaten, strip searched, and held overnight without being informed of the charges against them or given a telephone call.” While the first meeting included “several hundred angry women,” LAPV at its core had around 25 active members. The group understood that this was “not an isolated event. The police have a consistent policy of looking the other way (when) gay people and third world people are being attacked by members of their own force.” The group exemplifies an early attempt at intersectional organizing against state-sanctioned violence. A later example of LAPV’s continued work includes a write up holding space for individuals outside of the queer community, highlighted by their discussion of the death of Melvin Black, “a 15-year-old unarmed black youth killed by Oakland Police, demonstrated the

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<sup>51</sup> Flyer, History and Structure of LAPV, 1979, #89-5, Meg Barnett Collection of Lesbians Against Police Violence records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

aggression and racism of the police. Lesbians and Third World peoples have a common enemy in the police, and we of LAPV will make this connection and form alliances wherever possible.”<sup>52</sup>

LAPV used the strategy of cross-community storytelling to hit home the importance of collaboration between marginalized groups in San Francisco. The inherent nature of Sue and Shirley’s attack as an interracial lesbian couple should not be overlooked as an impactful part of what made this group focus on a breadth of identities being oppressed by state sanctioned violence, as both carried at least two levels of marginalization within their experiences.

The narrative positioned by LAPV was that police were the enemy, and queer people and people of color were actively on the front line, not out of desire but necessity. While this argument was more expansive and inclusive than that of their conservative gay peers, Hanhardt argues that “in crafting the language of solidarity and alliance, LAPV’s analysis nonetheless sometimes replicated the popular diagnosis of gay gentrification.” At the same time, they were “reinforcing the assumptions that gays were white and people of color were straight.”<sup>53</sup> This distinction shows the roots of white supremacy in gay liberation work, something the community is grappling with, even in the present.

While LAPV was formed in response to the acts inflicted upon Sue and Shirley, neither were organizers for the group. Discussing this in her interview, Sue talks about how tired she and Shirley were. We talked about the time commitment it took to seek legal counsel (fundraised and paid for by LAPV) and the pressure it had put on their lives. They remained the face and story, showing up and speaking about their experience and gaining support from their community.

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<sup>52</sup> History and Structure of LAPV, 1979, #89-5, Meg Barnett Collection of Lesbians Against Police Violence records, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA.

<sup>53</sup> Christina B. Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (Duke University Press, 2013), 118.

It was not too long after their charges were dropped by the city that Sue moved back home to Tulsa, leaving Shirley in San Francisco with her children. Sue left because the city was not the same city she expected to find on return from a short trip to visit family in Oklahoma in November of 1978.<sup>54</sup> Looking in her eyes when she talks about it, it is clear she is still heartbroken. With Sue and Shirley's case over, LAPV continued to organize and expand their scope through 1982. Like many queer organizations of its time, it slowly faded into the background and members were absorbed into other groups and causes.

The work they did to bring conversations about state and personal violence against marginalized peoples, especially lesbians, is substantial and was timely. Hanhardt considers them part of the:

wave of other lesbian and gay activist [that] took on what would become known as Reaganomics. These activists argued that the coalition of interests in the Religious and New Right not only represented a moralistic assault on sexual freedom but also stood for a regime of law and order and economic retrenchment that would cut stark lines of inequality not easily reduced to sexual identity alone. And they believed that the growing apparatus of state punishment... provided particular opportunities for lesbian and gay activists to pursue multi-issue political organizing.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Sue Davis, interview 2.

<sup>55</sup> Hanhardt, 118.



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## Womanalysis

### Police and Power

by Priscilla Alexander

There is currently a drive to recruit Lesbians and Gay men to work as police officers with the San Francisco Police Department. There is also currently an apparent increase in the use of "excessive force" in arrests, and an increase in the amount of police harassment of Lesbians, Gay men, and prostitutes.

We all know that Mayor Feinstein has called for a "clean-up" of the Tenderloin.

We are being told that it will be a clean-up of violent crime, but the calls that we get at COYOTE HOWLS, and that the Pre-Trial Diversion Project, the Public Defender's Office, Harry Ben's and Carol Ruth Silver's offices get, are not about people being arrested for violent crime.

Working at COYOTE HOWLS, I am familiar with the situation that prostitutes are confronted with. But I think it is safe to assume that what happens to prostitutes is repeated with other population groups, particularly those that do not

Something seems to happen when people become cops. Maybe a lot of them are being up on power to begin with, maybe that's why they become cops. I think a lot of people also become cops because it is a way out of poverty. Some must choose that occupation because they are really concerned about preventing crime, or controlling it, and making the world a safer place for people. But I doubt if most of them are like that.

If someone is a cop because he or she wants power, how do we, as a society, prevent them from abusing that power? The recent settlement of the CBS suits for Justice suit against the San Francisco Police Department promises to increase the number of minorities and women on the police force. The goal for women is twenty per cent.

The presence of women on the police force is a fairly new

phenomenon in this country, at least with any large numbers. In Israel, women have served on the police force for years. I have no idea whether or not they become brutal, but Susan Brownmiller, in her book "Against Our Will" said that the only armies that had no record of raping the women in a country they conquered were the two in which women served in more or less equal numbers, Israel being one of them.

One of the reasons for the recruitment of Lesbians, other women, and Gay men is a hope that their presence may open up the force to new ways of thinking. But there is a real question as to whether this presence will change the police, or whether the police force will brutalize the Lesbians and Gay men. Will they become abusers of power, swinging billy clubs and pulling out guns to impress their power over others? Will they, as some cops do now, develop a sense of "It's us against the world"? Or is it possible that if a large number of us, most of whom choose to deal with the world in non-standard ways, joined the force it would begin to change?

I want a society without violence. I want a world in which people care about each other and never do anything with another person without that person's total and free consent. We are a long way from that society. Meanwhile, the police department is encouraging us to apply. If you are interested, call Les Morgan, 921-4987 (days), 775-1000 (evenings) and/or go to Room 151, City Hall, to file an application. And tell other people.

**Fighting Back: How to Cope with the Medical, Emotional and Legal Consequences of Rape**  
by Janet Bode  
November - \$8.95

I came to Ms. Bode's study entranced with ignorance of

**Will large numbers of Gay men and Lesbians on the police force make a difference, or will they, too, be brutalized?**

conform to the white, middle class, heterosexual model.

Last year, 2,100 women and 512 men were arrested, as prostitutes, for "soliciting" an undercover police officer for an act of prostitution. But every one who works with prostitutes in any way hears, over and over again, variations on a theme of "I was walking down the street, and this man asked me for a date. I said no. He kept insisting, and I kept saying no. All of a sudden, this other cop says I am under arrest for 'soliciting.'" Or, "I was standing waiting for my friend, and this guy kept asking me to go for a drink or a cup of coffee. I kept saying no, I was waiting for someone. Finally, I said, 'Look, I am not hooking, and I know you are a cop. Get lost.'" He wanted me for soliciting.

Some women have been working on the San Francisco Police Force, and in the Sheriff's Department, for more than a year, now. Some of them have become as brutal as some of the men. Some of the women on the police force have been required to do vice detail (as contrasted to the

Complaints about bad arrests come in spurts. There will be months during which we receive no calls, and then there will be five or six calls within a couple of weeks - usually during a crackdown.

Most of the time, the arrested person pleads guilty to the lesser charge of obstructing the peace, just to get it over with. In actual courtroom experience, if a person charged with soliciting an act of prostitution pleads not guilty, the charges are usually dropped or the case ends in acquittal, at least in San Francisco. Of the 2,612 647th arrests last year, probably most of them were bad arrests. To me that is a gross abuse of power.

The recent arrest of Sue Davis and Shirley Wilson, with the amount of force that was used, seems to me to be a similar abuse. The harassment that is taking place on Park and Castro Streets, with cops carrying their billy clubs in a sabbie position, with men who have every right to be there being asked to produce I.D., is another abuse of power.

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**JANET BODE, AUTHOR OF STUDY ON THE EFFECTS OF RAPE**

Alexander, Priscilla. "Womanalysis: Police and Power." Bay Area Reporter (San Francisco, CA), Feb. 15, 1979.

The *Bay Area Reporter* article above showcases the ways in which the LGBT community was dealing with the issue of police brutality in the community. While some called for more of our own to join the force, others understood that Queer cops would be brutalized themselves or create new avenues for their peers to be brutalized. Alexander leverages Sue and Shirley's attack as a recent example of this type of violence. When talking about the real concern of "bad policing" she states that "the recent arrest of Sue Davis and Shirley Wilson, with the amount of force that was used, seems to be a similar abuse. The harassment that is taking place on Polk and Castro Streets, with cops carrying their billy clubs in a usable position, with men who have every right to be there being asked to produce I.D. is another abuse of power."

While LAPV was formed before the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980, they were experiencing the firsthand shift into this new era, full of conservative backlash from the strides of the civil rights movement and gay liberation front. LAPV used tactics and developed skills that would follow their members through the horrors of the AIDS epidemic, as queer women were active on the front lines of the political, religious, and medical fight to save their queer brothers and sisters. That was, of course, its own sort of state sanctioned violence

### *No Apologies: The White Night Riot*

Milk was dead at the hands of Dan White. The city was tense. Sue and Shirley's attack was well publicized and utilized as leverage with queer organizing against the cops. With Summer approaching and Milk's birthday around the corner, San Francisco was ready to explode. White's acquittal through "the Twinkie Defense" was the icing on the trauma cake fed to San Francisco queers and those watching from around the country.<sup>56</sup> What began as a peaceful vigil ended up a full-on violent episode, started by abuse from the cops. Queers burned it down. They

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<sup>56</sup> Kyubin Kim, "10 Facts about the White Night Riots," Mental Floss (Mental Floss, August 14, 2020), <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/627028/white-night-riots-facts>.

lit cars on fire. They screamed and rallied and broke windows. Dan White, a former cop, was still inciting violence against queer bodies with the help of his brothers on the force.

In early May of 2022, I was granted the ability to purchase a small lot of San Francisco queer archives from eBay. One of the items I acquired was a flyer from the White Night Riot. This tiny, discolored image, printed on the back of someone's personal poetry draft still has the tape marks from where it was hung to alert the community to gather together. For me and for Sue, this is more valuable than gold. I cried when I completed the purchase, knowing I was going to get to show Sue.<sup>57</sup> Showing her that image in her home, with our dear friend Olivia, is something I will never forget. I am sure I will write whole articles about it in the future.

When Sue saw the flyer, she took it and held it to her face. It was like she was absorbing the energy left behind. If it is not clear by now, Sue loves to tell a story, just not the traumatic ones. I often must ask a question several ways before she has an answer when it is a hard memory. And it is never given up freely. Except for when she was holding that flyer. She described recalling the smell of gold melting from the embellishments outside of city hall. She remembered the popping sounds from cop cars on fire and the feeling of being gassed. Diane Feinstein asked her to help get things under control at one point. Sue told me her response was that "she was getting the hell out of there."<sup>58</sup> Get out of there, she did. Once her and Shirley's charges were dropped, Sue planned her return to Oklahoma. She needed time to heal and rest. Go back to her roots and be with her family.

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<sup>57</sup> When Sue sold her home and moved into a retirement community, she got rid of most of her things from San Francisco. What she did keep, she donated to a local organization years ago. When she inquired about them in 2021, they could only locate some of her collection. Part of my project with Sue includes not just finding primary sources for my academic work, but to return to her an archive for her and her family to remember with her.

<sup>58</sup> Conversation with Sue, Tulsa, OK, May 2022.



Photo of Arlowe Clementine in Los Angeles sharing the White Night Flyer with other Point Foundation Scholars.  
Courtesy of Elizabeth Rose Elrod

***“Note to Self, Don’t Be Gay In Indiana”... Ohio.... Arkansas...Florida.... Or Oklahoma:  
Community and Regional Based Violence Against Queer Bodies***

While state-sanctioned violence is the clearest type to draw attention to, the next theme adds a layer of regional and individual nuance to the topic of violence against queer bodies. Here, scholars begin to draw attention to the intricacies of regional, cultural, and familial values in the US. While federal regulations control queer Americans overall, a spectrum of tactics are utilized to control us on region-by-region, state-by-state, county-by-county, city-by-city levels. An individual’s placement within the 2SLGBTQIA+ acronym, culture, race, gender, class, ethnicity, ability level, immigration status, reproductive anatomy, and educational level also becomes more nuanced at this level of violence. Here, the use of an intersectional understanding of the queer bodies’ proximity to violence continues to emerge.

There are several regional specific queer histories of violence and liberation. Some rely on traditional primary sources like state documents, but many utilize queer oral history methodologies to showcase the intricacies of regional queer experiences. Scholarship like *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (2014), by Christina B. Hanhardt, discusses the nuances of gay community building tactics and policy struggles of queer activists in San Francisco and New York City, two of the most well-known queer enclaves in the US.<sup>59</sup> Hanhardt examines the many contradictions that exist in the fight for equality and addressed racial and class specific issues that arose within the community, something that I will touch on further in my final theme of interpersonal and intimate partner violence.

*Safe Space* “examines how LGBT calls for “safe space” have been shaped by broader public safety initiatives that have sought solutions in policing and privatization and have had devastating effects along race and class lines.”<sup>60</sup> Hanhardt argues that San Francisco and New York were the birthplaces of collective queer organizing against violence not because they were special...but because they were made a larger target due to their larger numbers. While these “so-called gay ghetto(s) provided salvation from inhospitable small town(s),” it also made them “a clear target” for harassment and violence.<sup>61</sup>

While the coast was working through lanes of visibility and collective resistance, folks in the Midwest and the South had to use different methods of organization and survival. Samantha Allen’s *Real Queer America: LGBT Stories from Red States* (2017) leverages queer oral histories and personal reflection to showcase the intricacies of conservative and red state queer lives.<sup>62</sup> *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men in the South* (2012), by E. Patrick Johnson, highlights the experience

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<sup>59</sup> Hanhardt, *Safe Space*.

<sup>60</sup> Hanhardt, 89.

<sup>61</sup> Hanhardt, 89.

<sup>62</sup> Samantha Alan, *Real Queer America: LGBT Stories from Red States* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2020).

of Gay Black men, both violence against their bodies and the ways in which they build community.<sup>63</sup> Numerous self-published anthologies give voice to 2SLGBTQIA+ folks from different regional understandings to record their experience surviving their regional position as a Queer person. *Bible Belt Queers* (2020), edited by Darci McFarland, and *Godless Circumcisions: A Recollecting and Remembering of Blackness, Queerness & Flows of Survivance* (2016), by T. Anansi Wilson, provide contemporary sources of this type of historical record.<sup>64</sup>

Carol Mason showcases the ways in which Oklahoma is special, even on a regional level of understanding. The Okie experience is unique in many ways, and no, it is not because we are all riding in “surreys with the fringe on top.”<sup>65</sup> She argues that “Oklahoma’s liminal status reflects the indistinct geographic parameters of the Sunbelt. Oklahoma’s varied topographies and cultures defy usual definitions of the region. Boasting the most diverse terrain of any state in the United States, Oklahoma encompasses eleven ecoregions ranging from Tallgrass prairie and red dirt flatlands to forested mountains and cypress swamps.”<sup>66</sup> Some consider Oklahoma fly-over country, but Mason knows that “with interstate 40, 44, and 35 cutting through its midsection, Oklahoma is literally a crossroad of America.”<sup>67</sup> She also builds on David Chang’s understanding that “the history of Oklahoma is a history of movement, possession, and dispossession, It is American history told in fast-forward.”<sup>68</sup> Oklahoma is full of contradictions. While we are often known for Oral Roberts University, the white supremacist attack on the Alfred P. Murrah Building, and oil’s environmental hold on our economy and land, Mason reminds us that

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<sup>63</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (2012).

<sup>64</sup> Darci McFarland, *Bible Belt Queers* (Monee, IL: Self Published, 2019).  
Tabias Olajuawon Wilson, *Godless Circumcisions: A Recollection & Re-Membering of Blackness, Queerness & Flows of Survivance* (Washington, D.C.: The Griot's Pen, 2015).

<sup>65</sup> Gordon Macrae, “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top,” recorded August 1955, track 3 on *Oklahoma! (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)*, Rodgers and Hammerstein, online streaming.

<sup>66</sup> Mason, 11.

<sup>67</sup> Mason, 15.

<sup>68</sup> Mason, 2.

“Oklahoma tells us a lot about how politics shifted from the Left in the twentieth century. From the early days, the state was influenced by leftist populism. Including socialism.”<sup>69</sup> Like Oklahoma’s socialist roots, Queer people’s contributions to the state have been greatly ignored or purposely silenced by the conservative majority present in the state now.

Sue, like many others who grew up in the Bible Belt and left to find community on the coasts during the 60s and 70s, had access to a spectrum on queer existence that many others did not. They held both experiences of Oklahoma resiliency and community support as well as conservative ideals that held on tight to shame. They also experienced the resources and numbers available on the coast and knew that more could be done to help. They witnessed the erasure of Billy Tipton, Bruce Geoff, and Lynn Riggs from Oklahoma narratives. But they also witnessed firsthand the promise of Harvey Milk. Of the Daughters of Bilitis.<sup>70</sup> They saw both the sanctity of queer sexual liberation and the importance of family structures for survival. In future research, I hope to dig into the unique experiences of others that migrated to the coast and returned home. Here, the next lesson becomes a bit clearer:

*Oklahoma Queers have been vital to Queer culture overall.*

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<sup>69</sup> Mason, 8.

David Fritze, “The Gold and the Glory,” *This Land*, last modified August 16, 2015, <https://thislandpress.com/2015/08/16/the-gold-and-the-glory/>.

Kelly-Leigh Cooper, “Oklahoma City bombing: The day domestic terror shook America,” *BBC News*, last modified April 19, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51735115>.

“Oklahoma has had a surge of earthquakes since 2009. Are they due to fracking?,” *USGS Science for a Changing World*, accessed July 2020, <https://www.usgs.gov/faqs/oklahoma-has-had-surge-earthquakes-2009-are-they-due-fracking>.

<sup>70</sup> “Billye Talmadge, Tape 1 of 2,” *Lesbian Herstory Archives AudioVisual Collections*, accessed July 3, 2022, <http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/items/show/406>.

The Daughters of Bilitis, coined as the first lesbian organization in the country was founded in part, to an Okie named Billye Talmadge. Like with most origin stories about the movement, Billy has been left behind in much of the retelling of the organization and its leaders. Here is another scenario that showcases Queer Okie erasure.



***“Bless Your Heart” Violence: History of Violence Towards the Queer Body by the Religious Right***

In the same way that communal and regional based violence differs from place to place and community to community, the same is true for religious responses to Queerness. In this section, I have chosen to focus on Christian faith-based sanctioned violence, as it is the majority umbrella religion in the central parts of the US.<sup>71</sup> The upswing of social consciousness ushered in by the 1960s and 1970s was soon steamrolled by the rebirth of the Conservative American Dream highlighted by the rise of Reagan’s America in the 1980s. This shift back to conservative ideals brought new waves of violence against the queer body. Here another overlap is clear. Religious violence and medical violence become complicatedly intertwined during the rise of the AIDS epidemic.

Religious oppression of 2SLGBTQIA+ is present in all the previous texts mentioned up to this point, as Christian conservative values permeate this country’s understanding and moral disdain of queerness. Religious oppression is a key tactic of violence against queer bodies. *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence* (2006), by Michael Cobbs, lays a foundation of not only the rhetoric used to harm queer bodies, but also the ways in which queer people repurpose some of the religious right’s strategies in a type of counter-defense.<sup>72</sup> Carol Mason’s *Oklahomo: Lessons in Unqueering America* (2015) provides an excellent road map to understanding the violence supported through religious rhetoric and its ties to Oklahoma individuals.<sup>73</sup> Mason draws a direct line connecting to individuals like anti-gay villains Anita Bryant and Sally Kern, two Oklahoma women whose words have cause much violence against

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<sup>71</sup> This is not to say that religions outside of the Christianity framework cannot and have not been violence against queer bodies. For space and intentionality of this specific work, the Christian religious right will be highlighted as have been the leaders of anti-gay religious crusades in the US since the Puritans first began demonizing queer existence in what is now considered the Northeastern US region.

<sup>72</sup> Michael Cobb, *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

<sup>73</sup> Mason, 8.



queer people in the state and nation. She argues that “as a lesson in unqueering America, examining Oklahoma provides us with a microcosm of formative politics and shifts in economy and culture that have shaped the nation.”<sup>74</sup> This is due to the fact that our Okie history is “predicated on the dispossession and disciplining of indigenous people and African Americans” and that “Oklahoma exemplifies and encapsulates the settler colonialist, racialized rationales for land ownership, heteropatriarchy, and class divisions among whites that we find throughout the United States.”<sup>75</sup> Mason, along with other scholars she leverages, understands that the uniqueness of this place is not just in the sunsets or Queer history, but in the ways in which our history has often been the model of major ideological changes on the national level, for better or worse. As *Oklahomo* continued the nuanced conversation of specific roles anti-gay Christian crusaders played in religious violence against queer people, *Heavy Burdens: Seven Ways LGBTQ Christians Experience Harm in the Church* (2021) shows the ways in which the conversation has expanded through Bridget Eileen Rivera’s commitment to showcasing the lived experiences of LGBTQ people who continue to identify as Christian after coming out and the ways they are still affected by homophobia and transphobia, even in spaces categorized as affirming religious institutions.<sup>76</sup>

While all these texts provide insight into the unique circumstances queer people experience based on regionality, one of the most impactful ways to call upon the differences for queers in this part of the country is through the scholarship of Dr. Bernadette Barton. In her article “1CROSS + 3nails = 4GVN: Compulsory Christianity and Homosexuality in the Bible Belt Panopticon,” she relies on a Foucauldian understanding of systemic oppression and power

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<sup>74</sup> Mason, 8.

<sup>75</sup> Mason, 8.

<sup>76</sup> Bridget Eileen Rivera, *Heavy Burdens: Seven Ways LGBTQ Christians Experience Harm in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2021).

through the imagery of a panopticon.<sup>77</sup> Barton “explores the intersections among religiosity, region, and sexual identity to theorize how the Bible Belt panopticon operates to create an environment of compulsory Christianity.”<sup>78</sup> Barton argues that fundamentalist/evangelical ideology is “not confined to Sunday worship” in the Bible Belt, but that Christian crosses, messages, paraphernalia, music, news, and attitudes saturate everyday settings in which people work, shop, exercise, socialize, and worship.<sup>79</sup> This constant inundation with rhetoric that seeks to define Queer people's identity as an abomination causes extra stress and danger for LGBTQ+ people in the area. While denominational differences are present throughout this region, “they are uniform in their construction of homosexuality as an abomination to God.”<sup>80</sup> Barton argues persuasively that Christian ideologies “influence a wide range of local secular institutions like schools and workplaces.”<sup>81</sup> By understanding the ways Bible Belt culture reinforces surveillance by community and values, it is easy to comprehend the ways in which conservative Christian values infiltrate all of lives and the choices we are able to make.

One major way that Sue and I differ in experience is in the ways in which we view religion. Sue loved church and found many of her friends there. I felt overwhelmed and squashed in my Christian upbringing and left the church as soon as possible. We have both experienced violence through religious conviction, yet she remains hopeful. I think this has to do with many factors, including generational differences, but I also think our vastly different understandings of religion, family values, and politics are partially responsible. Sue, while religious, grew up in an Independent Baptist, Democrat household.<sup>82</sup> Her family was quite supportive of each other before Sue was outed and they had both church and community friends that surrounded them.

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<sup>77</sup> Bernadette Barton, “1CROSS + 3nails = 4GVN: Compulsory Christianity and Homosexuality in the Bible Belt Panopticon,” *Feminist Formations* 23, no. 1 (2011): 70-93, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2011.0015>.

<sup>78</sup>Barton, 71.

<sup>79</sup>Barton, 72.

<sup>80</sup>Barton, 73-74.

<sup>81</sup>Barton, 74.

<sup>82</sup>Sue Davis, interview 1.

When we discussed her mother's response to Sue's lesbian identity, the air left the room a little. Sue stated that "she cared about everybody, that is what Christ said to do. But, when I grew up, that attitude changed. That love everybody attitude was no longer there. And it may have always been that way and I just didn't know it."<sup>83</sup> Sue did not have the opportunity to ease her mother into the understanding of her queerness, since the military did it for her. Sue goes on to discuss this further: "The navy made me write a letter telling her I was being discharged because I was homosexual and that devastated her and she wrote a letter to me that I was dead. That she used to have a daughter named Sue and she no longer had a daughter named Sue, she was dead. That was really hard for me."<sup>84</sup> Unfortunately this is not uncommon even today.

My grandfather on my mother's side was the first to tell me I was disowned due to who I loved. It was 2006 and I had been outed by my sister. When I picked up the phone, my grandfather was enraged. After saying some racist sentiments, he doubled down by telling me I was an abomination and that was dead to the whole family. While the grandfather that disowned me identified as Southern Baptist, I grew up under the Pentecostal umbrella, within a family with major abuse cycles present, and was mostly isolated from everything outside of the church. Our religious trauma looks different, but it is still intimately connected. Oklahomans has been unfortunately a huge part of the discrimination of queer people in the United States. Mason's *Oklahomo* discusses its long legacy in detail, here I chose to focus on Anita Bryant's connection and anti-gay crusade.

### ***From Mentor to Villain: Anita Bryant through Sue's Eyes***

Finding YouTube footage of Anita Bryant being pied in the face by a gay activist was a wonderful personal gift. I must confess that even now, in 2022, I still pull it up sometimes when I

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<sup>83</sup> Sue Davis, interview 1.

<sup>84</sup> Sue Davis, interview 1.

have had a bad day or been personally victimized by a transphobic evangelical. The first time I saw the footage, I was inspired by the activist's bravery and laughed hysterically as Bryant prayed for his salvation.<sup>85</sup> She had been spewing hate at homosexuals and they wanted to make a mockery of her the way that she had been making a mockery of their existence with the "Save our Children" campaign.<sup>86</sup> As someone who has been called an abomination on one too many occasions, this sort of resistance may seem futile or stupid to some, but it helped me heal wounds left over from my evangelical upbringing.

Sue's personal experience with Anita Bryant adds an interesting perspective to the narrative. They are intimately connected. Sue and Anita both graduated from Tulsa Public Schools. Anita, a year older than Sue, even served as a mentor of sorts to her in their adolescence. Sue thought Bryant "was going places" and voted for her as President of Youth for Christ. They were both raised proud Oklahomans and as individuals felt called to preserve the values they learned from their community. Bryant followed the path of Oklahoma pageantry, the legacy of so many in the state who choose to bury the trauma this land holds with niceties and "bless your hearts." Sue, however, came from a legacy of Okie resistance. From an ancestry of helpers and organizers. She didn't care about the position that organizing could provide her with, instead she just knew what needed to be done and did it.

I am sure Sue had no idea when she voted for Anita, that they would be directly working against each other's missions a few years later. Sue did many things while in San Francisco. She organized nursing strikes, led multiple positions in the Gay Freedom Day Committees from 1974-1979. At one point, she also worked as a welding foreman, unwilling to cross the picket line of a

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<sup>85</sup> Trudy Ring, "Storming the Stage: A History of Disruptions to Advance Our Rights," *The Advocate Magazine*, August 19, 2015, <https://www.advocate.com/politics/2015/08/19/storming-stage-history-disruptions-advance-our-rights?page=0%2C0>.

<sup>86</sup> Jillian Eugenios, "Anita Bryant's Decades-Old 'Save Our Children' Campaign Rings Familiar in Florida," *Yahoo! News*, accessed July 3, 2022, <https://news.yahoo.com/1970s-christian-crusader-anita-bryant-215612074.html>.

nursing strike and tenacious enough to take a job often reserved for men at the time. She spent time mothering Shirley's children, worked on a variety of political campaigns. Sue was a leader in the boycott against Florida Orange Juice, as they used Bryant as a spokesperson for their juice and she was directly attacking queer professionals. Bryant has since moved from an Oklahoman with a flair for theatre to a political activist, leading the Save Our Children campaign, causing long term damage to the conservative public's understanding of queer people.

Carol Mason spends significant time in *Oklahomo* showcasing the ways in which Anita Bryant and her political crusade affected conservative tactics. She argues that "Anita Bryant's 1977 campaign against "militant homosexuality" made the Oklahoma celebrity the iconic face of American homophobia" and that "Scholars of the gay rights movement identify Anita Bryant's 1977 campaign against a Dade County, Florida, nondiscrimination ordinance as a historical moment that galvanized gay advocates nationally."<sup>87</sup> Sue and Shirley, native Oklahomans, were some of the organizers of those community leveraged boycotts. One may wonder how the state could produce such radically different people; Mason has an answer. Bryant was exposed to diverse people through theater but changed her position as conservative values began infiltrating her ideology, you see, "homophobia is a learned behavior, not a natural instinct, and Bryant, like many Oklahomans, was taught to reject queer practices and people."<sup>88</sup>

Sue Davis and Anita Bryant serve as just one version of both sides of the Okie political experience. Sue comes from a legacy of union folk. She worked on her first campaign at the age of ten years old and is still active in local politics now. She used her experiences and magnetic personality to do the work to better the lives of those living in the margins, no matter what they believed or who they loved. She leveraged community to succeed. Often, we hear about the Anita Bryants, James Lankfords, Sally Kerns, and Jim Inhoffes of Oklahoma. Their narrative of

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<sup>87</sup> Mason, 48.

<sup>88</sup> Mason, 61.

preserving “Oklahoma values” is upheld in the mainstream narrative of this land. But Sue Davis’ exist too. Representative Mauree Turner exists. Bruce Goeff and Billy Tipton existed too, and their legacies should not be forgotten.

***The Gay Cancer, Reproductive Autonomy, and Gender Affirming Care, OH MY!: Medical Based Violence Against the Queer Body***

Medical violence against queer bodies deserves its own paper. With much of our early recorded history in the contemporary US beginning in medical journals, our lives have often been dehumanized and pathologized. This began to change with the Gay Liberation Movement. While many forms of medical violence were present in the first three quarters of the twentieth century, the AIDS epidemic may be the most explored. With the onset of AIDS, formally known as GRID, the queer community began rapidly losing members to the disease. This began an almost immediate shift in preserving the treatment of our dead and dying through community centered texts, literature, film, and theatre. This is exemplified by Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* (1987) and Johnathan Larson’s *Rent*, and recently through *Pose*.<sup>89</sup>

In 1993, Virginia Berridge brought the US and UK anti-queer politics to the forefront of the AIDS conversation in *AIDS and Contemporary History* where she argues that the medical violence inflicted on individuals due to HIV/AIDS was an ongoing political issue.<sup>90</sup> BIPOC and women’s voices were often overlooked in early work but began to be better represented at the turn of the century. Jacob Levenson’s 2004 book, *The Secret Epidemic: The Story of AIDS and Black America*, discusses the ways in which Black Americans, especially Black men who sleep with men, were disproportionately being infected with and dying from the virus.<sup>91</sup> *An Archive of*

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<sup>89</sup> Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart* (New Haven, CT: Long Wharf Theatre, 1986).

Jonathan Larson, *Rent: En Rock-Opera Inspireret Af "La bohème"* (Aalborg: Aalborg Teater, 1999). *Pose*, 2019.

<sup>90</sup> Virginia Berridge, *AIDS and Contemporary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993).

<sup>91</sup> Jacob Levenson, *The Secret Epidemic: The Story of Aids and Black America* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005).

*Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, by Ann Cvetkovich, expands the narrative by utilizing oral histories of Lesbian members of ACT UP to discuss the physical and psychological effects AIDS has had on the community overall.

While histories of the traumas of HIV are ever present, queer scholars are also discussing other ways that violence in the medical field has explicitly and implicitly harmed queer people. Some works, including Eli Claire's *Exile and Pride* (1999), discuss the connections between queerness and disability in the US and the interconnectedness of these issues that create barriers towards liberation for both groups and those that hold multiple identities of marginalization. Intersex individuals within the community often experience the earliest forms of queer bodily violence, sometimes happening in utero or quickly after birth.<sup>92</sup> *Bodies in Doubt: The History of Intersex* (2009) by Elizabeth Reis offers a detailed history of intersex existence and harm against their bodies.<sup>93</sup>

Anthologies and first-person accounts like Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* (1990) and *Bodies and Barriers: Queer Activists on Health* (2020) edited by Adrian Shanker highlight the fact that queer people have been advocating for their health through visibility and storytelling adding the ways in which queer people experience sickness and medical interventions.<sup>94</sup> Finally, scholarship like Katie Batza's *Before AIDS: Gay Health Politics in the 1970s* (2018) works to expand our understanding of LGBTQIA+ reproductive rights work before the onset of HIV, including the acknowledgement of gay men and the advancement of plasma-based vaccine development.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>93</sup> Elizabeth Reis, *Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021).

<sup>94</sup> Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1990).

Adrian Shanker, *Bodies and Barriers: Queer Activists on Health* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2020).

<sup>95</sup> Katie Batza, in *Before AIDS: Gay Health Politics in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 39.

### *Sue's Intimate Knowledge of Medical Violence Against Queer Bodies*

I do not think I will ever be able to comprehend the amount of medical violence Sue has had survived or has been witness to. As a nurse, Sue has worked in some of the most vulnerable areas of care. She has delivered babies in elevators, nursed soldiers back to health, worked in makeshift burn units, and in pediatric care.<sup>96</sup> She has been present for a variety of medical epidemics including Polio, HIV, and now Covid. This witnessing of folks close to you succumbing to a virus is enough to cause trauma; living it adds another layer.

Sue has dealt with chronic illness, lack of effective health care, mental health issues, and physical trauma from a variety of physical attacks. Sue was a long-term smoker, something that still affects queer people at higher rates than our straight and cis peers.<sup>97</sup> While she gave up smoking when she was diagnosed with COPD, the effects have been lasting. She has gone through several bouts of throat cancer and experienced COVID twice. She has survived several attacks against her body at the hands of the police and of men who assaulted her. Her body is and has been a battleground for survival.

She also witnessed the loss of many friends in the last few decades. While chatting with Vernon, Sue's feelings about losing Phil were clear even without speaking many words. His death still haunts them both. Sue shared regrets about not being there in his final days, Vernon shared regrets on having to make the call letting her know he was gone. I have personally attended multiple memorials with Sue in the last few years, grieving friends we have lost from COVID and other health issues. She has lost both her parents and several of her siblings. She has lost lovers and friends, yet she remains. This is the next lesson I have learned from Sue:

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<sup>96</sup> Sue Davis, interview 1.

<sup>97</sup> "Smoking and LGBT Community: How Stress and Stigma Create Smokers," Tobacco, accessed July 5, 2022, <https://tobaccofreelife.org/resources/smoking-lgbt-community/>.



*Loss stays with you, and it's okay to feel it.*

***Traumatized People Traumatize People: Interpersonal and Intimate Partner Queer Violence***

Interpersonal conflict is difficult to discuss in any marginalized community. It can be hard to stomach the idea that those that are oppressed through explicit and implicit violent means would replicate that same violence onto others. Unfortunately, trauma often begets trauma. The Gay Liberation Movement allowed us to become visible to the masses, AIDS brought the death of many of our community, the rise of the Religious Right ushered in new forms of erasure and violence that we are still working to overcome today. With all of the violence coming from outside sources, it is not surprising that conversations surrounding interpersonal harm (specifically from cisgender and white members of the community) and intimate partner violence play a large role in the day-to-day trauma experienced by queer and transgender individuals in the community. This interpersonal violence can take the shape of racial discrimination, gender discrimination, political and class discrimination to name a few. Stigma surrounding intimate partner violence in queer spaces is often upheld in gender-based support systems and within the legal system.

Emily K. Hobson's *Lavender and Red* provides a deeper dive into the often-overlooked spectrum of LGBTQIA+ political belief and centers the activists that withstood violence from not only state violence, but also their own more conservative community members. *Transgender Intimate Partner Violence* (2020) edited by Adam M. Messinger and Xavier L. Guadalupe-Diaz provides further nuance on violence against transgender bodies by those closest to them.<sup>98</sup> I am certain that more scholarship will be developed in the coming years surrounding interpersonal trauma inflicted on queer bodies by their chosen family, friends, lovers, and community leaders.

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<sup>98</sup> Adam M. Messinger and Xavier L. Guadalupe-Diaz, *Transgender Intimate Partner Violence: A Comprehensive Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

*Assaulted on many fronts: Sue is a Survivor*

Before joining the military, Sue married a man. She still is not sure why she did it, her best guess being that all her friends were doing it and her family liked the guy. They met while Sue was working with his uncle, who had been severely burned, in the hospital. He was nice and pursued her, so she said yes. When we sat down to talk about this, she discussed knowing it was the wrong decision, her dad telling her to walk away before they walked down the aisle together. She had no idea what she was getting herself into when she said her vows, or that the marriage would be dissolved just one month later.<sup>99</sup>

The man Sue married was a big man. His family were pig farmers and owned land out near Bixby, Oklahoma. Sue had never been sexually intimate before her wedding night. Consummating their marriage led to violence against Sue's body. The damage was so bad, she had to have reparative surgery on her vulva. Her first sexual experience was inherently violent and solidified her body would be forever closed to men. Not only did he physically harm her body, but he also sold her car, a beloved 57 Chevy. The combination of those two things, along with a physician advocate, gave Sue the courage to leave, even though she knew her family would not approve.

I wish that I could say this was the last time sexual violence happened to Sue, but it was not. When Sue first moved to San Francisco, before meeting Shirley, she worked outside nursing jobs to survive while nursing strikes were active. While working as a process server in the city, Sue was sexually assaulted and beaten by a group of men. She had only been there a few months and without support, she came home to Tulsa to heal, this time long enough to meet Shirley and start a partnership with her, leading to their return to San Francisco together.

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<sup>99</sup> Sue Davis, interview 1.

Sue and I have not talked about the day I called her after leaving my abuser. That day I spewed my trauma at her without realizing what I was asking her to hold. The memories of assault it must have brought back to the forefront of her mind. I remember her telling me she loved me and that I did not do anything wrong, that she was glad I made it out. We picked up like we had not skipped a beat, and now I understand why, she had intimate knowledge of the harm I experienced. That so many of us experience. Yet, she held it in. Focused her energy on my safety, something she has been doing for so many of us for so long, without us even realizing it. This brings me to the fifth lesson I've learned from Sue:

*It is okay to leave.*

***Community Healing brings Liberation for All: Holistic Approaches and the Future of Conversations about Violence Against Queer Bodies***

Several contemporary texts showcase the ways in which queer scholarship is working to think through violence against queer bodies in a more holistic way. Scholarship like Meyer's *Violence Against Queer People* (2016), *Killing the Rainbow* (2016) by RJ Parker, and *Bodies of Evidence* (2012) provides different perspectives of queer theory that center healing from the multiple violent inflictions placed on queer bodies and the ways in which queer people are leading the charge of healing by holding space, pushing back, and recording our truth; even when it is traumatic.<sup>100</sup>

Violence comes in all shapes in sizes. In no way does this represent a comprehensive look at the multiple avenues in which violence has been recorded in the lives of queer Americans in the late twentieth and twenty first centuries. Looking at the themes represented above including

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<sup>100</sup> Doug Meyer, *Violence against Queer People: Race, Class, Gender, and the Persistence of Anti-LGBT Discrimination*.

R. J. Parker, *Killing the Rainbow: Violence against LGBT* (Toronto, Ontario: RJ Parker, 2016).  
Boyd and Roque Ramirez, *Bodies of Evidence*.

violence from the state, regional violence, religious violence, medical violence, and interpersonal violence enacted on queer bodies many questions emerge. What does bodily autonomy and liberation look like for all queer individuals? What tactics have been employed in the past by queer people to push back against that violence? As conservative values see a resurgence in the US, what forms of violence may be inflicted on queer bodies both now and in the future? How do we advocate for change? Can we live in a society where violence against queer people does not exist?

While I do not have all the answers (none of us do), recording the experiences of elders like Sue makes space to understand where we have been and where we are going. I want to leave the conversation around queer trauma with another quote from Alok's *Beyond the Binary* as a reminder of what is at stake for queer people and why recording it is important to our current and future survival: "Imagine everyone you encounter all day long telling you that you are not real and that there is something fundamentally wrong with you. Being constantly invalidated takes a toll: 40 percent of trans and gender non-conforming people have attempted suicide."<sup>101</sup>

### ***Breathing Break:***

So often, in Queer scholarship, we are presented with traumatic facts and not given the space to process them in the moment. Without feeling it, it stays with us, like a poison. Before we move past this place, take a moment and breathe. Hold space for your own trauma, for the trauma that Sue has been brave enough to share, and for all the collective trauma we are feeling living in during this historic time.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Vaid Menon, *Beyond the Binary*.

<sup>102</sup> I also understand that breathing does not stop the trauma from continuing, but acknowledging it is the first step to healing. It is part of our Queer lineage to create art when processing unrequited love, lack of bodily autonomy, etc. So, in the footsteps of Emily Dickinson, Oscar Wilde, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Keith Haring, and Catherine Opi when I came down with a severe case of writer's block during this writing process, I started creating. A few of those images are showcased in Part Two.

## CHAPTER III

### PART TWO: LEANING INTO LIBERATION AND JOY

“you never wish on shooting stars  
you wish on the ones  
that have the courage to shine where they are,  
no matter how dark the night.”<sup>1</sup>  
-Andrea Gibson

Sue has lived a dynamic life. She has fought hard and loved harder. As a healer, Sue has touched the lives of countless people throughout her journey. Even in retirement, Sue spends most of her time helping others, whether it is babysitting her great nibblings or taking her friend’s blood pressure when they aren’t feeling great at her retirement community.<sup>2</sup> She has been an active leader in SAGE for years and calls BINGO every week. While Sue did many things between the time she moved back to Tulsa in 1980 until we met in 2016, those stories are for a different time. A time when I can give her story more space than a thesis can provide. In the following pages, I will focus on Sue’s early life through her time in San Francisco and 2016 to the present. This too is intentional. You see, while Sue never went completely back into the closet, she did take a long break from Queer community activism after returning home. It was in 2016 when Sue reactivated in a major way, this time for me and others in the community to witness. Within these timelines are themes of: Queer visibility, support from one’s family of

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Gibson, *Pole Dancing to Gospel Hymns* (Austin, TX: Write Bloody Publishing, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “Nibbling,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/words-were-watching-nibbling>.

origin and chosen family, romantic and sexual freedom, the ability of caring for others, adventure seeking, use of humor, intergenerational connection, and pure tenacity paint a picture of how Sue survived the trauma experienced in Part One. How she emerged as a beacon of light for other Queer people to trust and love. How she became my Queer constellation.

### **Failing Where It Counts: Mapping a Shooting Star**

In Jen Jack Giesecking's "Mapping Lesbian and Queer Lines of Desire: Constellations of Queer Urban Space," constellations are used to explain the impact of queer and lesbian elders on our present and futures.<sup>1</sup> This mystical practice allows for reimagining the way we understand each other, outside of the binaries that are often present. Giesecking says that:

while the attachment to astrology risk sentimentality or nostalgia, it is also 'the recognition that our [queer] worlds, imagined or otherwise, are fucked in totalizing and crushing ways' so that a 'love for astrology carries for queers this unconvincing illusion, this mark of woundedness, of wanting to be convinced'... Indeed, the stars, lines, and networks of constellations indicate how queers arrive at and keep going to create worlds while remaining 'symptomatically suspicious' of cis-heteropatriarchy.<sup>2</sup>

Knowing Sue is a Leo Sun makes it easier for me to explain her tenacity to other queer people in conversation. Her roar is big when she needs it to be. Leo's love a party and Sue exemplifies that. She would much rather make you laugh or nurse your wound than use the roar, but she has it none the less. As an Aries, I get it. I have unrestricted passion at my disposal, something that has gotten me in trouble from time to time. Combined, Sue and I are a force. I get my best ideas when I am with her.

I start this part here, because frankly, Queer joy is hard to quantify. It is also not as well documented as queer trauma. For so long, we have been forced to hide our light,

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<sup>1</sup> Jen Jack Giesecking, "Mapping Lesbian and Queer Lines of Desire: Constellations of Queer Urban Space," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38, no. 5 (February 2020): pp. 941-960, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775820926513>.

<sup>2</sup> Giesecking, 943.

our love, and our communal activities for fear of physical, legal, or societal retribution. Though so much of our recorded history and academic focus is about our fighting back, medical stigma inflicted on us, dying of disease, and being erased from the general narrative. Because of all of this, I will focus this part less on secondary scholarship and more on primary source information and the understanding of “body-knowing” I have as a queer Oklahoman. You see, the way we survive is often similar—even if we aren’t given a roadmap to growing up Queer there are stars shining the way in the form of those that came before us.

### **A Closer Look at *The Queer Art of Failure***

The first time I ever thought I could be a Queer theorist was after reading Halberstam’s *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*.<sup>3</sup> In all of their works, they speak truth and break rules in a way I have never seen within the academic sphere. I am constantly recommending their texts to community organizers, as I think they help recenter Queer organizing back to the methods of our ancestors. Halberstam argues that:

Academics, activists, artists, and cartoon characters have long been on a quest to articulate an alternative vision of life, love, and labor and to put such a vision into practice. Through the use of manifestoes, a range of political tactics, and new technologies of representation, radical utopians continue to search for different ways of being in the world and being in relation to one another than those already prescribed for the liberal and consumer subject.<sup>4</sup>

They employ the use of low theory, which “tries to locate all the in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony and speared by the seductions of the gift shop. But it also makes its peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique

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<sup>3</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 2.

and refusal.”<sup>5</sup> *The Queer Art of Failure* relies on SpongeBob SquarePants and *Dude, Where’s My Car?* to discuss serious issues and realities of Queer existence, reminding us that everything you need to know you can find in the form of art and storytelling.

Part Two will be significantly shorter than Part One. Here, we will sit in small memories of joy and rebuilding as well as failure and forgetting. Here, I make space for the parts that will never have a newspaper article written about them, for the experiences that showcase Queer joy and liberation. This is an act of resistance. Halberstam discussed this through the memory. They argue that “memory is itself a disciplinary mechanism that Foucault calls “a ritual of power,” it selects for what is important (the histories of triumph), it reads a continuous narrative into one full of ruptures and contradictions, and it sets precedents for other “memorializations.”<sup>6</sup>

What follows serves as an entry point to how we, Okie Queers, have and continue to survive. This is not an exhaustive list, as queer culture often thrives in secret spaces, texts, and rituals. We have failed our family legacies, our Christian upbringings, and mainstream cultures that have worked to assimilate us into a hegemonic and heteronormative society. I hope by the end, it is clear that failing can be positive, it can open us up to liberation and Queer community. That we should be proud of.

***“And your keys oh... your ring of keys”: Dyke Visibility in Sue’s early years***

Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* changed my life. It was one of the first Queer culture texts I consumed as a young baby dyke living in Oklahoma City. While the graphic story overall is compelling and beautiful and tragic, the musical really gets me as a previous theatre gay. In the story, a young lesbian sees a butch mail carrier with a ring

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<sup>5</sup> Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 15.



of keys around her belt loop. While she is yet to understand her own sexuality, she understands she is like the butch woman. She just knows. This knowledge is almost innate for some queers. In the 90s, they called it GAYDAR. I like to think of it as a cosmic connection bigger than ourselves.<sup>7</sup> When we notice each other, we are just noticing our inherent magic.

As a previous youth worker, I have seen firsthand the impact visibility has on young queer kids. Just one trusted adult they can be authentic with leads to a dramatic drop in suicidal ideation.<sup>8</sup> This sort of explicit visibility has not always been available and is currently in danger of being made illegal in many school systems across the country through attacks on affirming educational practices.<sup>9</sup> When Sue was growing up, homosexual activity was still illegal, so the fact that she was able to witness lesbian love at an early age left a mark on Sue. During our interview, Sue mentioned two specific “ring of keys” type experiences growing up that I would like to discuss further. Insert lesson from Sue here:

*If you can see it, you can be it and more.*

Sue tried to quit softball once in middle school. While she loved the sport, she decided she could not be associated with being a lesbian. You see, some of the girls on her team were talking about oral sex between two girls one day after practice.<sup>10</sup> Sue was

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<sup>7</sup> Davis, 137.

**GAYDAR:**

Noun:

The perceived ability to intuitively identify if a person is gay, bisexual, or queer. The term “queeradar” can also be used.

<sup>8</sup> “Accepting Adults Reduce Suicide Attempts Among LGBTQ Youth,” *The Trevor Project*, last modified June 27, 2019, <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/accepting-adults-reduce-suicide-attempts-among-lgbtq-youth/>.

<sup>9</sup> Zack Beauchamp, “Why book banning is back,” *VOX*, last modified February 10, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/22914767/book-banning-crt-school-boards-republicans>.

<sup>10</sup> Sue Davis, interview 1.

not having it. She told her mom that she wanted to quit, and her mother questioned her decision. Her mother told her that being uncomfortable was not enough to give up and that until they had made a move on her that she did not want, there was no reason to quit. Women loving women was not a new concept to Sue and her mother. Jonnie Davis, Sue's mother, was actively involved as a caretaker for a lesbian couple's child, though they were not called that openly at the time. Her lack of regard for the social mores of the time taught Sue to respect all people around her, even when others did not. Unfortunately, that kindness and support around sexuality was not always extended to Sue from her mother. As mentioned earlier, years later, after her forced outing by the United States Navy, Sue's mother would temporarily disown her.

This models the contradictions some Okie Queers witness every day. Being told to be a light to the world around you and actively being told yours is too bright, to hide it under a bush, or in our case, in a closet.

Mark Twain Elementary is on the west side of Tulsa, Sue's stomping grounds. This public school holds a special place for both Sue and I. Sue spent her elementary school years there. She made lifelong friends there and had access to a lesbian couple who both taught at the school. My experience with Mark Twain came in adulthood. While finishing my undergraduate degree, I served as an AmeriCorps Member with Camp Fire Green Country. That year, I was given an after-school club there, along with my dear friend Alexa. Over that year, our friendship grew and so did the relationships we formed with the young people we met.

My work with Campfire Green allowed me to work with young people to develop social and emotional learning skills. During that year of service and after in a management capacity, I worked with youth from kindergarten through high school. I was

able to develop new introductory games that included the use of pronouns, to make space for gender expansive young people at all age. In one club, we did several weeks of dance programming, which led to the most energetic voguing and soul train sessions I have ever been a part of. Campfire allowed me and the young people I work with to reflect on ways to be a good community member. I met several young people during those years that were part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ spectrum and I am proud that I was able to support them through a year of AmeriCorps service.

Hearing about the importance of the love story of a librarian and a gym teacher at Mark Twain Elementary in the 1950s helped me understand the embedded connection Sue and I share, both spoken and unspoken and how that reverberates through the Queer Oklahoma sunset to shine on other young Queers looking into it.

As someone who spent the years 2017-2019 walking into schools in Oklahoma as my almost-authentic self to support young people who could not always be, learning about Ms. Hibbler and Ms. Moot from Sue helped me understand how important it is and how long that support can linger in the hearts of Queer people living in unsupportive environments. According to Sue, Ms. Hibbler was a femme presenting librarian who was sweet and always looked beautiful. It was Ms. Moot, the gym teacher, that leaned into butch culture as much as she could and still be safe. They raised a child together. Sue's mom was their caregiver. I asked Sue if she ever saw them be physically affectionate, she said no... but she did remember the way they looked at each other. She did not have to explain any further. I know the look of two queer people who are admiring the magic of the other. I see it when I look into my chosen family's eyes.

While Sue's teachers showed her love between two women, it was another Queer nurse in Tulsa who introduced Sue to the idea of joining the military. After Sue left her

husband, she looked for a fresh start. While she does not remember the nurse's name, she does know that her suggestion to Sue to join the Navy was more than just a display of patriotism. According to Sue, it was one lesbian looking out for the other.

While the military brought Sue copious amounts of spoken and unspoken trauma, it also opened her eyes to her own identity, even though it was through force. It offered her a world outside of Oklahoma. In both cases, Sue did not have the words yet to explain her connection to them, but she knew she had one, nonetheless. These women were burning bright enough in Oklahoma to light the way for Sue, solidifying their place as part of Sue's Queer constellation.

### ***We are Family***

If you would have told me ten years ago that I would be taking my biological baby brother to his first Pride in 2022, I would not have believed you. I have spent most of my adult life estranged from my biological family ties on both sides. This is due to a variety of reasons, some are easy to explain, but others remain unfathomable. My experience is not special: in fact, many Queer people lose their family when they find themselves. If you grew up evangelical, like I did, the chances of not just being lost but actively rebuked is high, even in 2022. This experience changed me. It also changed our relationship.

Pride in Tulsa is always in June. It is so damn hot. In 2022, Black Queer Tulsa put on the first Black Queer Pride celebration the second full weekend of the month.<sup>11</sup> It was beautiful. Most of the events were on the same street as Tulsa Tough, a Tulsa staple.<sup>12</sup> Watching the Queer community and the cyclist community meet like that was

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<sup>11</sup> "About Us," *Black Queer Tulsa*, accessed July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022, <http://www.blackqueertulsa.org/about-1>.

<sup>12</sup> "Saint Francis Tulsa Tough," Tulsa Tough, accessed July 5, 2022, <https://www.tulsatough.com/>.

wild. I taught my brother how to tip a drag queen and we ate baked goods to cool off at a spot close by called Antoinette Baking Co. I watched my sibling sign his first petition and my heart grew three sizes. While at the event held at Hardesty Arts Center (AHHA) we participated in a community art project. It was a heart paper chain that we could write messages on. Mine read “the ancestors are with us today and every day,” my brother wrote “you will always have family.” I held back tears as we stapled them together. We spent so many years apart. Separated by family trauma and fear.

My brother and I reconnected right before lockdown started in 2020. We met at a Village Inn and stayed for hours. It was the first time he used my new name and saw my budding ginger facial hair. We took two years to build real trust with each other. That Pride experience showed me that we were family in a way bigger than our biological connection—we were choosing it for ourselves. I’ll never forget that day in June. It solidified the next lesson Sue taught me...

### *Family is What You Make It*

Most of Sue’s nuclear family of origin have passed on. In all honesty, we have not talked much about her experiences with this type of loss yet. What we have discussed on and off the record about her family is full of Okie irony. She loves her family very much; this is evident by the photo gallery on her apartment wall and in the way she discusses their memory. Especially her father Bill and brother Coleman. According to Sue, her father gave her lots of space to be who she was, even at a young age. More on that a bit later. Coleman, her younger brother, was a wild one and passionate about the causes he believed in. His late wife Sharon King-Davis and her family took Sue into their extended family, giving her space to be part of a larger mission and support system, something that is vital to Sue’s character.

It is her father's side of the family that also brought Sue her aunt Addie. Bill Davis's sibling encouraged Sue to break gender norms and be a go getter. Sue's mother Johnnie even blamed Addie for Sue being unwilling to wear dresses to school.<sup>13</sup> When Sue first graduated high school, she spent the summer with her aunt and uncle in Lawrence, Kansas. Addie tried to convince Sue to stay and attend the University of Kansas' nursing program but Sue's mother "would not allow it."<sup>14</sup> While Sue is unclear as to why, I have a few guesses. Parents who have early indication that their child is Queer, may want to stifle that, whether out of shame or protection, sometimes both.

Johnnie, Sue's mother was not afraid to love everyone for who they were, at least not on a surface level. She supported lesbian couples and gave up seats on the public bus to Black women during Jim Crow segregation. She was an advocate for many. Yet when Sue was outed, her mother did not handle it well.

According to Sue, she only liked one of her long-term partners, Pearl. She was not embracing of Shirley or anyone who came after her. But when Johnnie got sick, Sue was the one who took care of her. Like many Okie Queers, we often put our own identities and needs on the back burner to take care of family obligations. In a conversation with Sue early on in our interview process, I asked her if her family knew about her attack and the work she did in San Francisco. She told me "Not in any real detail, talking with you is the first time I have spoken about it in depth."<sup>15</sup>

I'll never forget the moment and processing it afterwards. Sue is so proud of her family contributions to Tulsa and the larger Teamster legacy. She dotes on their accomplishments and remembers them as often as possible. Knowing her mother and

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<sup>13</sup> Sue Davis, interview 1.

<sup>14</sup> Sue Davis, interview 1.

<sup>15</sup> Sue Davis, conversation, September 2021.

father passed without truly knowing the force she brought in the world is a hard pill to swallow. I have made it my personal mission to make sure her legacy lives on in academic and public spaces but the thing that makes me hopeful of Sue's legacy living on came from being witness and part of the chosen family that Sue has cultivated for herself.

It should be clear by now that Sue is part of my chosen family. My matriarch, if you will. When I changed my legal name in 2022, I took Sue's name as part of my own. As someone who was originally named after two women on my mother's side, I wanted to keep the sentiment of having a foundation of strong feminine power, but I did not want the ties to my family of origin anymore. I did not have to linger long for a new connection. It was always Sue. So, when I called to tell her I was officially Arlowe Sue Clementine, she got emotional on the phone. We told each other that we loved each other, and, in that moment, I knew she finally believed me when I said I would carry her story with me always.

I am not the only one. Many people consider Sue chosen family. I recently had the privilege of sitting down with my dear friend Olivia Lamb.<sup>16</sup> We met each other and Sue around the same time in 2016. Our friendship grew through our time at OSU-Tulsa, as we were both pursuing an undergraduate degree in American Studies. We talked about many things, including how hard Sue tried to pick us up in the beginning of our friendship. Who can blame her—we were curvy redheads in charge, one of Sue's types. Over the years, Sue became a bigger part of Olivia's life as well as her children's. Her oldest child Ace is a transman and beginning transitioning right after high school. While Sue did not quite understand the reasons, she worked hard to support Olivia and Ace through the process. Sue has gone on many adventures with Olivia and her family,

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<sup>16</sup> Olivia Lamb, interview 1.

including political rallies at home and nationally. Sue inspired both Olivia and I to pursue Queer cultural work both inside and outside of the academy. It was Olivia that remained a bridge between Sue and I when we were not speaking, giving us both updates on the other since we were both too proud to reach out personally, much like a sibling dealing with an internal family conflict.

I'm not the only friendship with Sue that took some time apart from and then resumed right where we left off. The same is true for her relationship with Vernon Jones. While Vernon and Sue met before her time in San Francisco, their relationship was tethered by Phil Wiley, Vernon's longtime companion and a dear friend of Sue's.<sup>17</sup> In 2021, I sat down with the two of them for a group interview. I learned so many things during that process.

I learned that group interviews are fun and full of energy, and also hard to keep on track. I learned that Vernon should have been a formally trained oral historian, as he asked better questions than I did in that conversation. The biggest thing I learned though, was what a tether Phil was for Sue and Vernon, but also for the community in general. After Phil's death in 1999, Sue and Vernon only stayed in casual contact until 2017, when they both got involved with Shay White's campaign for District 77 House Seat Representative. Vernon lived in District 77 and Sue was eager to leverage his connections. Shay, Sue, Vernon, and myself met on multiple occasions at Vernon's home. I did not know then that they were just rekindling their relationship. They had things to fight for and they knew they needed each other. Since 2017, Sue and Vernon have gotten closer. They get together at local diners often. I sometimes get calls back-to-back from them, as they conspire together about plans and then fill me in later. Recently,

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<sup>17</sup> Sue Davis and Vernon Jones, group interview 1.



Vernon and Sue both shared with me that after attending a friend's memorial, they promised each other over some cups of tea that they would take care of one another.

*From Scrapbooks to Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll, and back again*

Most people I knew and hung out with in my late adolescence and early adulthood understood I was Queer way before I did. I was a big "A" ally. Most of the young men I dated before coming out were blatantly queer even though they were mostly closeted. It was not until my first semester of college that I began considering that I was a lesbian.<sup>18</sup> I started a new job at a Blockbuster video (RIP) in Edmond in 2006. My trainer was a queer woman, the first woman I wanted to love. She was a few years older and super butch presenting. She wore a carabiner on her belt loop and worked at a lesbian-run burger joint in Oklahoma City on the side.

On my first day, she took me on a tour of the store. When we got to the "special interest" section, she stopped and told me, "this is where they put the gay shit." I asked her if they rented out a lot of gay content, naïve to the cue she was sending me. Her response was, "oh damn, you don't know you are gay yet. This will be fun." We spent months becoming friends and going on gay pseudo-dates. Her best friend was a drag queen and mine was dating one. Those months were scary. I could tell she was trying to push me out of my repressed shell, but I was scared. I was not sure what to do, or what I wanted. It was months before we kissed each other. It took the confidence of too much tequila at a house party for me to gather the nerve.

That night, one of my roommates in the house walked in, and immediately slammed the door shut. In drunken college kid fashion, she screamed "no one go upstairs,

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<sup>18</sup> I have come out many times, in many ways. The first time was as a lesbian, the second as bisexual, then pansexual, then Queer. Through all of those coming outs, I did not address my gender. That came years later. Now I identify as a NeuroQueer Nonbinary person.

give them some space.” When we came down those stairs, I was greeted by a round of applause and several “it’s about times.” While that relationship did not go far or end well, I am thankful for the time she took to give me space to figure it out.

Sue’s first notable crush came in the form of a YWCA camp counselor nicknamed Doug. Sue was obsessed with her and wanted to be always in her presence. When she got home from camp, she made a scrapbook of her time there. It was really a showcase of Doug. Sue did not understand why Doug was different, as she was just in elementary school, but she knew she liked her and wanted to be like her when she grew up. Her mother or siblings never said anything about the scrapbook, and she never saw Doug again after camp, but her presence still lingers in Sue’s memory.<sup>19</sup> She is one of the original stars in her queer constellation. I wonder if Doug saw Sue’s queerness, with an unquantifiable queer knowing. I sure do hope so.

Sue spent the rest of her teenage years and early twenties being uninterested in romantic relationships. She focused on her friends and her schooling. Even once she was in the military, she did not explore her sexuality, even though she was accused of it by her commanders. It was on the train ride home that Sue and another discharged naval nurse hooked up. Sue’s first lesbian experience. They “went to bed together on the way home from Chicago.”<sup>20</sup> Sue smiled when she told me that story. She was proud of turning something horrific into a success. Sue never turned back from loving women after that point. And she has loved a lot of women....

Nursing provided Sue with the opportunity to meet women. She worked with and slept with several of her co-workers in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Sometimes they

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<sup>19</sup> Sue Davis, interview 1.

<sup>20</sup> Sue Davis, interview 1.

were also out lesbians but often they were women looking to explore and intrigued by Sue. Those encounters were about love in some ways, like love of the female form or love of a good orgasm. She liked having a good time with few strings. This is not uncommon for this time frame, as out lesbian long-term relationships were happening, but not the norm in places like Oklahoma. She had a few serious relationships, including with a woman name Pearl, but it was Shirley that made Sue serious about a relationship.

Shirley was already a mother when she met Sue. They were introduced at a local Tulsa party, and Sue was immediately smitten. Sue had returned home from a short stint in San Francisco that had ended in some trauma. She was healing and planning on returning back as soon as she could. This time, Shirley and her children came with her. They spent years together in San Francisco, experienced great joy and great trauma together, and then they split for a while around 1980. Sue came home to Tulsa, Shirley stayed for a while before returning home herself. They still talk almost daily, spend weekends together and take trips when they feel up to it. I recently asked Sue about the state of their relationship now and she could not give me a simple answer.

They would always be partners. They would always love each other. But the formalities of a relationship stopped working for them, Sue says that “Shirley stopped putting up with her bullshit.”<sup>21</sup> Honestly, I wish I could tell you more about their relationship at this point, but Sue protects it fiercely and has been set on Shirley being part of the interview process. I find their long-lasting love and care for each other deeply inspiring. Shirley is permanently part of Sue constellation. This exemplifies one of the ways in which queer love breaks the rules. How we survive.

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<sup>21</sup> Phone conversation with Sue Davis, May 2022

Another option that is also underdiscussed is the sexual and romantic freedom that queerness affords many of us. Because we are already breaking the rules set by larger society, we often create different networks of loving. This can vary from casual sex to queer platonic life partners. The world is our oyster. When I asked Sue how they survived the terrible tension of the 1970s in San Francisco, her answer was short and sweet, “We got drunk and fucked... a lot.”<sup>22</sup> Often queer people, especially in the Midwest, feel shame about speaking the truth of how we love. Even when Sue shared that sentiment with me, it was in the form of a whisper. She fought back the truth because of imposed shame. Bodily autonomy and sexual freedom are liberatory to not just queer bodies, but all marginalized and oppressed bodies. I am glad she told me the truth in that moment, even if it needed to be whispered.

*“Queerness offers the promise of failure as a way of life...” (Halberstam)*

I never wanted to get married. It was never on my bucket list. I had watched most the marriages in my family of origin fail miserably. While I had been proposed to twice in my twenties by previous partners, I only said yes to “the ask” because it was not a real possibility to marry in the US at that point. It was a symbol of commitment, but queered. An “I will say I am engaged because you say I cannot get married” kind of vibe. So, in 2018 when I started shopping for an engagement ring for my then partner, I was shocked at my own actions. I convinced myself this time was different, that we had a big queer fairy tale love. I proposed at the Blue Whale in my hometown of Catoosa, Oklahoma in the Fall of that year.<sup>23</sup> We were married the next September, during the Fall Equinox, surrounded by their biological family and my chosen one.

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<sup>22</sup> Sue Davis, Interview 2.

<sup>23</sup> “Blue Whale,” TravelOK.com - Oklahoma's Official Travel & Tourism Site, accessed July 5, 2022, <https://www.travelok.com/listings/view.profile/id.653>.

It was a party. A queer celebration of love on a queer budget. We got married at a site that meant a lot to us separately and together. I wrote our whole ceremony and was proud to include a bell hooks reading as the main entrée.<sup>24</sup> We even had a friend and famous drag photographer as our wedding photographer. Queer youth we had worked with attended. It was a rainbow filled snapshot of the ways that queers can love.

Unfortunately, our relationship was not all those things. It took me longer than it should have to leave, partially due to the fantasy that was spun around our relationship. Most of this was self-inflicted but some of it came from outside pressures to model “healthy adult queer relationships,” even at my personal detriment. There were signs and even a few warnings, one of which came from Sue. But I could not give up the fantasy. That relationship was not good for my physical, spiritual, or emotional health. I am still healing from it and am unsure if I will ever be the same again. But I still think fondly of that wedding day and the queer community energy that surrounded us. I’m also thankful for that relationship, because I came out as nonbinary during that time, something I may have never done if I was not in a pressure cooker.

Here the next lesson I learned from Sue (and J. Halberstam) applies:

*Failure can be the best thing that ever happens to you.*

By “traditional” Oklahoma conservative value sets, Sue is a major failure. She was only briefly married, kicked out of the military, and her body was “tarnished” by assaults that some homophobes may deem warranted. She smoked cigarettes in her young adulthood and sometimes drinks one too many Gin Gimlets. She is always on time to call B-I-N-G-O but does not attend church regularly. She has aided and abetted adulterous women and been a part of direct action against systems we are expected to respect. She is

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<sup>24</sup> bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions* (London: The Women's Press, 2000).

still not quite sure if she is allowed into Senator Jim Inhofe's office after a scuffle they had in the 1980s. She lives alone and is not wealthy in a material sense. In those ways she has failed, something I will be eternally grateful for. I am so glad she was brave enough to speak her truth and fight back. To lean into failing. Halberstam supports this sentiment in his text, stating that "from the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success. Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures."<sup>25</sup>

While some may consider her a failure, she is also an eighty-year-old Lesbian from Oklahoma who organized in San Francisco during the Gay Liberation era. Her San Francisco story survived in a few footnotes for me to find and preserve. That is a feat greater than most can ever fathom. Her failure by conservative standards makes her a Queer constellation for others to follow.

In the next few paragraphs, I want to highlight some of my favorite failures of Sue's life that she has shared with me or that I have personally witnessed.

The first failure I want to discuss is Sue's attempt to take Jane Fonda to bed. While I mentioned it earlier, I believe this type of bravery deserves to be commended twice. Jane Fonda is and always has been a lesbian icon. While she does not identify that way herself, her political action and long-term partnership with Lily Tomlin give her access to the community in ways not all allies are offered.<sup>26</sup> Recently, her 1979 interview in San Francisco went viral on Tik Tok. A whole new generation of young activists are learning about her role in political spaces for over five decades. In the interview from

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<sup>25</sup> Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ryan Buxton, "Lily Tomlin's Long Road to Publicly Discussing Her Sexuality," *Huff Post*, last modified February 2, 2016, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/lily-tomlin-time-cover-gay\\_n\\_7102620](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/lily-tomlin-time-cover-gay_n_7102620).

1979, Fonda is asked if gay people are discriminated against and whether she feels she is being “used” for their cause. Her response says so much: “Absolutely. Culturally, psychologically, economically, politically, gay and lesbians are discriminated against... “I hope they use me, what am I here for if not to be used by good people for good things?”<sup>27</sup>

I’m not surprised that the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Committee sent Sue to the airport to escort a head-lining Jane Fonda. She always knows how to bring the party. According to Sue, she picked Fonda up for a tour of some of the gay bars in the Castro and Mission, something Fonda did on a number of occasions. When I asked Sue if she remembered the lines she used in her attempt, she could not recall exactly what she said, but she told me she worked hard to charm her. Who could blame her? Like I mentioned before, Sue loves a lady in charge and ones that may fall into the category of a woman who did not yet know she was gay, sometimes referred to as a “spaghetti girl.”<sup>28</sup> Some may consider her pick up attempts too forward or affirming the idea that queer people attempt to “turn” straight people gay. That is not how I see this specific failure. I see this as a representation of the courage needed to be a woman who loved women in the 1970s. You had to take some risks to find out who may be interested, especially if you were a soft butch who was often attracted to femme presenting women.

A good political fight fuels Sue. I have seen it happen on multiple occasions. Witnessing Sue leverage her skillset for Shay White’s campaign was a true pleasure. Even in her later 70s, she was full of logistical knowledge, fundraising ideas, and not afraid of pushing back on policy conversations when needed. When Shay lost the

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<sup>27</sup> Louis Chilton, “Resurfaced video of Jane Fonda championing LGBT+ rights in 1979 goes viral on Twitter,” *Independent*, last modified September 11, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/jane-fonda-interview-gay-rights-protest-lgbt-twitter-b421919.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Gay: ‘Spaghetti Girl,’” *Word of the Gay: "Spaghetti Girl"*, accessed July 5, 2022, <https://queersunited.blogspot.com/2009/05/word-of-gay-spaghetti-girl.html>.

primary, everyone who had been working on her campaign was obviously devastated. Especially Queer people on the team. Shay was in the middle of coming out herself, something she did publicly after the race. I think Sue and Vernon saw her queerness before many others, in the same way the ex-naval nurse saw Sue and my Blockbuster trainer saw me.

The next memory comes many years later in 2018. That January, a cohort of over thirty 2SLGBTQIA+ people (age ranging from 13 to at least 80), got on a charter bus in Tulsa and headed to Washington, D.C. for the LGBT Task Force's Annual Creating Change conference. I will never forget that trip. This is another instance of a story that will produce whole articles in the future. Sue was on that trip along with several of her close friends. They were amped up and ready to go on the way there, but when I checked in with them on day two of the conference, several of them seemed overwhelmed.

This is not surprising. The first time I attended Creating Change in 2017, I had a true Queer spiritual experience. Seeing Queer people from all over the country, in one place, strategizing around intersectional 2SLBTQIA+ issues, was like being in a dream. It was also the first time I saw Queer people pushing back in our own space, something that forever changed me personally, professionally, and academically. I was like a sponge, taking in all the Queer culture I could. While I leaned into all of it immediately, I can imagine that is not everyone's experience.

Sue and some others from her generation were overwhelmed. They were hearing words they had never heard before. They witnessed pregnant transgender men and multiple disruptive protests during regularly scheduled meetings and events.<sup>29</sup> They were

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<sup>29</sup> "Transgender Dad Share his Pregnancy & Birth Story," *The Birth Hour*, accessed July 2022, <https://thebirthhour.com/transgender-dad-shares-pregnancy-birth-story/>.



overwhelmed and felt left behind in some ways. Sitting in the hotel lobby, Sue told the table that she was not going to attend any more workshops. The list was overwhelming, and she was worried she was going to say something wrong and be “cancelled.”<sup>30</sup>

After some conversation, Sue had changed her mind. We had worked through some scenarios together and looked at the agenda to decide what would be a good fit. Over the course of the conference, my Queer Oklahoma elders went to workshops where they learned how to be a white ally to Queer BIPOC people in the movement in the present, they danced the night away at an intergenerational dance, and watched one of their own-Carolyn (aka Cougar Anne)—receive a standing ovation that lasted for several minutes.<sup>31</sup> I’m really glad Sue was willing to fail and open up about it during that early conference conversation. Her honesty helped others express their own fears. Here is another lesson I learned from Sue.

*Leave no one behind*

*Trauma is CAMP!*<sup>32</sup>

In 2016, I had an embroidery piece showcased in an actual museum. The piece started as a joke, egged on by my friend Molly. We met in an embroidery class, we were both new to the craft. We spent weeks hanging out with older progressive women from around town, laughing and stitching. The piece I decided to work on for the course was overly ambitious, a trait I often lean into as an Aries. On the first day of class, I told Molly I was going to make an embroidered collage of vulvas, as we were still in the

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<sup>30</sup> Nic Austin, “Cancel Culture and the Queer Community,” *The Queer Queue*, last modified May 18, 2021, <https://thequeerqueue.com/cancel-culture-and-the-queer-community/>.

<sup>31</sup> Olivia Lamb, interview 1.

<sup>32</sup> Davis, 60.

**CAMP:**

Noun:

“The spirit of extravagance, irony, and exaggerated bad taste.”

“grab them by the pussy” era of time.<sup>33</sup> It was massive and over 200 hours of work for a beginner. When the piece was done, it was in the form of a flower pot with vulva flowers, something the women in class helped me name: *The Pot of Twats*. While not its original intention. This piece of stretched fabric has hung in my home since, in the form of a Queer crest of sorts.

I was shocked when we found out our work would be displayed that Fall inside of AHHA. I had considered myself many things by that point, but “artist” was not one of them. I took my friends to see it hanging, but I thought this was a one in done kinda thing. The sort of fact about myself that I would use for a game of “Two Truths and a Lie” or some other get-to-know-you activity. I started the *Pot of Twats* as a form of resistance as to what was happening in the world around me, inspired by badass older women who were just as enraged as I was, but that act of trauma humor took me places I never thought I would go. The next time I would display an original piece of art, I would not even be in town to celebrate it.

In early May of 2022, I got severe writer’s block. Every day I was waking up to learn of some new horror that was being inflicted on marginalized bodies in this country. Writing about trauma was sometimes too overwhelming to do. After a full day of binge-watching *Grace and Frankie* and disassociating from reality, I decided I would do something creative. This decision birthed my next two art pieces that has been formally displayed, showed below.

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<sup>33</sup> “US election: Full transcript of Donald Trump’s obscene videotape,” *BBC News*, last modified October 9, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-37595321>.



One fact about me is that, as a previous youth worker and current avid garage-saler, I always have a “project box.” This treasure trove contains a variety of options to distract myself with, but on this specific occasion, it was full of what I would call “religious paraphernalia.” For years, I have been personally collecting and have been given a significant amount of the type of items that may fall into the “religious paraphernalia” category. This collection has several horrific vintage “white Jesus” portraits, tons of Tammy Faye Baker items, Christian home décor with undeniable sexual innuendo attached, and even a few horrific hell, fire, and brimstone type sermon recordings. Looking at the box of stuff, I decided to channel my frustration through it. What started as one piece has turned into at least four completed ones and I have plans for at least ten more. When I told another friend about it, they said, “honey, that is a whole art show worth. You need a name for the collection.” With the help of Mary

Larson, it now has one: *Blessed and Highly Favored: Solidifying My Place in Hell*.<sup>34</sup> This work will first be displayed in part in an ongoing installation, dreamed up by my friend Karl and made possible by Queer community collaboration, *The Center for Queer Prairie Studies*.<sup>35</sup>

Using humor, satire, and inappropriate language is queer culture. Who can be surprised by these tactics used, when so often Queer people are gaslit into being told we do not exist, are not able to live a happy life, and are treated like villains?<sup>36</sup> Sometimes the only way to survive this type of treatment is to make fun of it, a way of showing the joke that is homophobia. This can be showcased in many ways through Sue's life, inside and outside of the record. Below, I offer a few of my favorites from the LAPV archive as well as our interview series together.

LAPV was birthed during a tense time. Milk was dead, Dan White was sure to get away with murder, and conservative viewpoints were on the rise. Getting information into the hands of the community was vital but would also create more stress on already stressed individuals. Their use of mockery of the cops in their pamphlet below includes some zingers. This LAPV created pamphlet does not shy away from using Queer cultural signifiers like astrology, seen by the use of "the cop was a Scorpio with a penis rising." It also draws different attention to the absurdity of the "Twinkie Defense" used in White's criminal case. Sue and Shirley's intersecting identities are highlighted as well as their work in the community. It also gives rich information for folks to learn more about the systemic ways that the police have been brutalizing Queer people in San Francisco during

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<sup>34</sup> I was chatting with Mary and a few others before a meeting, and I mentioned I was working on a show title. When I gave her the options, she told me to "be a proper academic and use a colon." Best advice ever.

<sup>35</sup> "Writer, Editor, Performer and Visual Artist Karl Jones," *Tulsa Artist Fellowship*, accessed June 2022, <https://www.tulsaartistfellowship.org/fellows/karl-jones>.

<sup>36</sup> Ellen Gutoskey, "The Forgotten Hollywood History Behind the Term Gaslighting," *Mental Floss*, last modified January 28, 2022, <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/654923/forgotten-hollywood-history-behind-term-gaslighting>.

this time, with the use of detailed correct answers that are factual and heavy, allowing folks to equip themselves with further <sup>37</sup>knowledge of the issues effecting the community.


On January 21, 1979, as Sue and Shirley were leaving Amelia's, a women's bar in the Mission, they were verbally abused and roughed up by the police in front of many witnesses.

They were taken to the Mission Police Station and verbally and physically abused again. They were then taken to the City Prison at the Hall of Injustice where their abuse continued.

One woman was forcibly strip-searched by Sheriff's deputies including two male officers. They were denied phone calls for many hours.

They were not informed of the charges against them until they were released hours later. They were charged with resisting arrest, failure to identify themselves, and public drunkenness. The charges were later dropped. They had to seek medical attention.

Sue and Shirley are both lesbians. Shirley is a Native American, a mother and a grandmother. Sue had worked on the Gay Day Parade, and they had both come to Amelia's directly after a Gay Day Parade meeting.



WHAT DOES NOT BELONG IN THIS PICTURE???

The correct answers are: 1d, 2d, 3d, 4e, 5d.

**CHOOSE THE RIGHT ANSWER:**

1. Why did Sue and Shirley get it?
  - a. The cop was a Scorpio with penis rising.
  - b. They deserved it.
  - c. The cops ate Twinkies for dinner that night.
  - d. The bar is in a poor neighborhood. They are women and lesbians, Shirley is Third World, Harvey Milk had been assassinated and it was open season on gays.
  
2. Why is this incident important over a year later?
  - a. Sue and Shirley are suing the city. Maybe they will get a million dollars and throw an orgy.
  - b. It's not important. With some gays on the police force our problems are over.
  - c. It teaches us not to go outside unless we have to.
  - d. It is important because people are still being terrorized by the police and Sue and Shirley are fighting back. People who fight back need our support.
  
3. What other things do the police do?
  - a. Discourage real estate speculators from breaking up Third World communities.
  - b. Protect you at all costs.
  - c. Clean up the dog shit.
  - d. Patrol Third World communities like an occupying army, harass young people in the Mission and on Polk St., help scabs break strikes, live out of town, beat their wives and other women, beat lesbians and gay men, take bribes, murder Melvin Black and more than 20 other black people in Oakland in 1979, trap prostitutes, evict old and poor people from the International Hotel and other places, marry Patty Hearst, kill Harvey Milk, murder Third World people all over the country, etc. etc. (continue from your own personal experiences).
  
4. Whose interest do the police in the Mission serve?
  - a. The poor.
  - b. Just Third World people.
  - c. All gays.
  - d. Rape victims.
  - e. The same people who brought us BART,
  
5. Who is LAPV?
  - a. The Ladies Auxilliary of the Los Angeles Police Dept.
  - b. A softball team.
  - c. A group of political rhetoriticians who meet monthly to howl at the full moon and write leaflets.
  - d. Lesbians Against Police Violence is a group who organized around the police brutality against Sue and Shirley. We began with outrage over police violence against lesbians. We saw its ramifications everywhere in our society, against people of color (including Latinos in the Mission and Black people in Oakland), prostitutes, poor people, gay people and women. In our work, we are attempting to educate ourselves about our common enemies and take action against them.

<sup>37</sup> LAPV Flyers Folder, Meg Barnett Collection

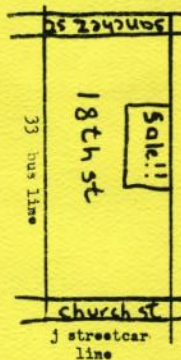


Looking for a really *different* book about Amelia Earhart? ... A set of spoons and bongos? ... The love of your life? Try the

# SUE AND SHIRLEY RUMMAGE SALE

## SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 20

18th Street,  
between  
Sanchez &  
Church  
S.F.



Sue Davis and Shirley Wilson are two lesbians who were attacked by the S.F. police as they were leaving a wimmin's bar in 1979. Sue and Shirley are preparing a suit against the S.F.P.D.

Sponsored by Lesbians Against Police Violence  
to benefit the Sue and Shirley Fund.

[1990]



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One of my favorite things about the queer experience, at least in the Midwest, is using what we must to fund what we need. This can take the form of volunteer hours, housing folks in need of shelter, making glamorous drag outfits out of thrift store finds, and taking over spaces that are often not meant for us. LAPV leveraged their resources to help fund Sue and Shirley's fight with the SFPD. Sometimes it took the form of rummage sales. Utilizing this sort of

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<sup>38</sup> LAPV archive, Flyer Folder

fundraising tactic displays the sentiment “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure.” I imagine queer people filling bags with odds and ends, queer coded art, old clothing, and other household items to fight the cops. I wonder how many protest art pieces came out of that garage sale? How many unhoused young queers were provided with clothing and other resources through their fundraising efforts?

Lastly, I want to discuss some of the trends within my interview series with Sue. These are also visible in other interviews I have conducted, but it was my sit down with Sue and Vernon that made me realize how often we were laughing through the most traumatic lines we spoke together. How so often, Sue or Vernon would say something so heavy, but end it with a chuckle. Let me be clear, laughter is not present because we consider what has happened to be light or humorous, instead it is a sort of coping mechanism to not spend the rest of the time full of tears or too upset to speak our truths.

### *Express Yourself Before You Wreck Yourself*

Fashion would be nothing without Queer people and their vision. If you want to see trends coming in the near future, look to oddball queers and drag queens. They set the trends without even trying. Self-expression allows Queer people to present in a more affirming way for their sexuality and gender but is also used to find it each other. When I first came out, I had a nice older lesbian explain the signs to locating a femme lesbian “in the wild.” She told me that there are always signs, you just have to know what to look for. Short nails, sensible shoes, and body hair were a few of the easiest signals to pick up on. At the time, I presented femme. A-lined skirts with big patterns and sensible shoes were already part of my uniform. I never shaved my legs or let my nails grow long after that conversation. Those were the first steps for queering my presentation in a purposeful way. That was over fifteen years ago. My identity label has changed

multiple times and I have found new ways of queering my public presentation, but those rules given to me by an elder are still ones I keep.

While I presented femme for over a decade of my open queer life, it never quite fit. During the pandemic, I made several changes to my body to showcase my queer nonbinary identity. Instead of relying on more coded rules, I wanted to make it perfectly clear where I stand from the moment you meet me. It started by buzzing my hair off, something that had been on my bucket list for a long time. Next came visibly queer imagery on my body through tattooing.<sup>39</sup> Since 2020, I have added a “Fast Car” reference in the form of a “ticket to anywhere,” a bundle of sticks (a faggot) on my arm, and a piece from Keith Haring on my thigh.

I understand that this blatant queering of my body is a privilege in some ways, often not afforded to other queer people from older generations, people in smaller communities, and those that are worried about “professional standards” in the workplace. Dedicating my life to being openly queer and telling our stories comes with real risk, but also the freedom to be as loud as I want to be. Sue did not have that option. Sometimes I wonder if Sue may fall outside of the gender binary, something we have talked about some, but she thinks she is “too old” to open that Pandora’s box. The thing about gender fluidity, is it has always existed, the terms were just not defined in the past.

Sue’s fight against gender norms began in seventh grade. Tulsa Public Schools allowed girls and boys to wear pants up until the 7<sup>th</sup> grade in the 1950s. It was during one of the most awkward stages of adolescence that young girls were reminded of the ways in which their bodies will be policed throughout their lifetime. Their dress code required them to wear dresses every day. When Sue found this out, she protested. She told her family, “Folks, here is the deal. I am

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<sup>39</sup> James Besanvalle, “The Secret Gay History of Tattoos and their Hidden Meanings,” *Medium*, last modified August 25, 2018, <https://medium.com/@jamesbesanvalle/the-secret-gay-history-of-tattoos-and-their-hidden-meanings-4e7993282fae>.



not wearing a dress, so I am going to quit school.” After her father realized that she was not going to budge, her mother informed her that she would have to get a job to support herself. She walked herself down the road to the Rathbone’s general store and asked for a job. As a close family friend, they gave her what she asked for. After five or so days of work, Sue buckled and decided to wear the dress. After that, Sue was not really interested in school. She was being stifled every day she woke up.<sup>40</sup>

Sue identifies as a “soft butch.” I have never seen her in a dress or skirt and have maybe seen her with light makeup on two or three times in our friendship. She keeps her hair short and mostly wears OU branded clothing. She is warm, kind, and nurturing; something generally categorized with feminine energy, but she is more androgynous than most older women I know. I imagine that was even clearer in her younger years. Sue was never afraid to compete with the boys. She worked beside them in Union spaces, Gay Liberation spaces, and she even took “a man’s job” as a welding foreman in San Francisco when the nurses were on strike. Sue would never cross a picket line.

***Making Good Trouble: Showing the World our Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent<sup>41</sup>***

“If you don’t love yourself, how the hell are you gonna love someone else?” Ru Paul Charles has been using this tagline for at least a decade. Ru is a Queer force, sometimes loved, sometimes hated within and outside of the community.<sup>42</sup> While he has not always gotten it right, especially when it comes to supporting transgender individuals within the community, he has inspired us to be seen, leverage resources, and create new avenues for queer success. Ru knows

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<sup>40</sup> Sue Davis, interview 1.

<sup>41</sup> “RuPauls Drag Race (TV Series),” *IMDB*, accessed July 2022, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1353056/>.

<sup>42</sup> Phaylen Fairchild, “The Problem with RuPaul,” *Medium*, last modified March 4, 2018, <https://phaylen.medium.com/the-problem-with-rupaul-34d393975579>.

that Queer love is liberation, and it starts with loving ourselves, even when we are told we should not.

Growing up in the Evangelical church, it was hard to not feel god. Tactics used in this realm of Christianity include lots of communal rituals, laying of hands, vocal displays of praise, and celebratory dancing. While I often had unanswered questions about the justice of the Bible I was being taught, feeling god was easy. It is what kept me in the church longer than I should have been there. When I attended my first secular concert, I had an awakening. For the first time, I truly understood what I had actually been experiencing, communal energy. This can be defined in many ways, but it was an American Studies course in my undergraduate degree that gave me the term I now use, “collective effervescence.”<sup>43</sup> This defines the energy created in a group of people. It can cause folks to do things they may not normally do. Like speak in tongues or dance in front of a large group of people.

While Queer people do not own the act of collective effervescence, I would argue that we are experts at leaning into queer liberation when we are large groups. While the church uses ministers and praise and worship leaders, the queer scene uses drag performers and hype-persons. Instead of songs to god, we belt out songs from divas who have made space for us and our feelings in the mainstream. We may not pass around an offering plate but being equipped with one-dollar bills for our drag services is a must. We hoot and holler. Raise our hands to the sky or clap them to the beat. When we are together, we see each other in all of our glory, both the kind that is god-given and that which we make for ourselves.

Sue has been active in engaging in communal Queer events for as long as I have known her. Our friendship blossomed while I was bartending Drag BINGO events. She is known to

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<sup>43</sup> “Collective Effervescence,” *Psychology Wiki*, accessed June 2022, [https://psychology.fandom.com/wiki/Collective\\_effervescence](https://psychology.fandom.com/wiki/Collective_effervescence).

crash parties that limit attendance to gay men only and is always up for infiltrating a conservative political rally. She has volunteered on multiple occasions to work with Queer youth, making her a local hero to several young people I have had the pleasure of working with. Sometimes this collective effervescence is full of joy, but other times, it is a safe way for us to grieve together, like in the case of the Pulse Shooting Vigil we attended in 2016 at a local gay bar in Tulsa.<sup>44</sup>

Here is the final lesson I have learned with Sue:

*Queer People are Sacred and Holy.*

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<sup>44</sup> Michael Martin, "What's Changed since the Pulse Nightclub Shooting," *NPR*, last modified June 12, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/12/1005937089/whats-changed-since-the-pulse-nightclub-shooting>.

## CHAPTER IV

### PART THREE: WE ARE NEVER ACTUALLY FINISHED AKA REIMAGINING OKLAHOMA!

I hope this thesis failed you. That was the goal the whole time. I hope that you were thrown off by the entry point, timeline, chosen scholarship, queer cultural cues left unexplained, and my inability to stick to any type of true structure. I hope you leave this piece with more questions than you began with. Living as a Queer person in Oklahoma, we do not have the luxury of following a roadmap. We are often told our truths are wrong because they cannot be quantified in the same way that our cisgender and straight peers can. We are told we are wrong or must comply with a standard that is not vast enough to hold our experiences or light.

Truthfully, I have written and erased history a thousand times by this point. I have spoken it even more times than that. It has been carried in my heart, into my classrooms, and recently all the way to Los Angeles. Sue's story and the deep need to tell it has taken me places I never thought I would go. The wild thing is, now I understand I will never be done, nor do I want to be. The story of Sue is the story of me, and is the story of every Queer Okie that comes after me. We just keep forgetting to remember. That is the big secret the enemy does not want us to know. The signs of our existence and importance are everywhere. Queer Okies are revolutionaries.

Our existence has been actively erased for generations, but still, we exist and persist. We still love big and push back against those who think this place is not for us. Sometimes we leave this place, out of choice or force, and sometimes we stay and hold it down here. Sue's story has both realities. Both sides of her story are important.

This work held space for the trauma inflicted upon her body, expanded the understanding of her connection to the Gay Liberation Movement, and allowed others that care for her to discuss the ways in which her existence has made their lives better. It contains a multitude of connections to queer scholarship I respect, and sometimes provided a sense of honesty that may make some uncomfortable. It is in that uncomfotability that people grow and change their minds and expand their capacities for understanding.

As I prepare to leave Oklahoma to attend a PhD program in Kansas, I am both excited and scared. Oklahoma has always been my home. I truly thought I would stay forever.<sup>1</sup> My journey out of here is just beginning. One thing that makes this a little easier to fathom is my connection to Sue and her story. Knowing that my roots will stay here makes me feel grounded, but for the first time in my life, I am excited to see what is available to me outside the boundary we call Oklahoma.

Over the next few years (or decades), I hope to build a bigger theory on Queer Okie migration. Not on my own, but with communal support. I know this work is a foundational piece of making that a reality. I want to dig into the ways in which reverse coastal migration is happening in the Midwest, due to philanthropic programs building infrastructure to relocate young creatives to places like Tulsa. While this is exciting in some ways, it is also terrifying. As it so often happens in activism and social justice circles, people on the ground here get

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<sup>1</sup> Lauren Zuniga, "To the Oklahoma Progressives Plotting Mass Exodus," *Lauren Brazzle*, accessed June 2022, <https://www.laurenbrazzle.com/poems/oklahoma-progressives-plotting-mass-exodus>.

overlooked while folks from outside of the area are praised for saying the same things we have been screaming from the mountaintops.

I have hope for our future though. We are living in a world where the musical *Oklahoma!* has been reimagined to be closer to the world Lynn Riggs was hopeful for.<sup>2</sup> Currently Ado Annie is played by a Black Transgender Woman, something I never thought I would get to say!<sup>3</sup> Greyson Chance, an openly Gay Oklahoman, is making waves on the music charts.<sup>4</sup> Representative Mauree Turner just won their second primary for their spot in House District 88.<sup>5</sup> And we just opened *The Center for Queer Prairie Studies* in Karl Jones' Tulsa Art Fellowship art studio. Even when politicians and conservatives work to erase us in the now, we are doubling down on our visibility.<sup>6</sup> They can attempt to get rid of the queerness that is found here, but it will never remove the truth. Oklahoma is Queer.

My work with Sue is far from over. We have more interviews to sit for, more research to do. In the coming year, I hope to begin a podcast about this experience, plan a few community conversations, and formally present Sue and her family with this work and other archival documents I have been collecting. Creating Change, the conference mentioned earlier, is having their next conference in San Francisco. Olivia and I have every intention of taking Sue back there for the event. More importantly, we have more Queer family memories to make.

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Morrow, "Broadway's Forgotten Man," *This Land*, last modified April 30, 2014, <https://thislandpress.com/2014/04/30/broadways-forgotten-man/>.

<sup>3</sup> Wren Sanders, "Sis is Packing Her Bags for *Oklahoma!*," *Them*, last modified October 8, 2021, <https://www.them.us/story/broadway-actress-activist-sis-oklahoma-revival-tour>.

<sup>4</sup> Bobby Box, "At 21, Greyson Chance is back from Retirement and Ready for Redemption," *Billboard*, last modified March 12, 2019, <https://www.billboard.com/culture/pride/greyson-chance-interview-portraits-8502124/#!>.

<sup>5</sup> John Russell, "LGBTQ Lawmakers Win Primaries in 3 States," *LGBTQ Nation*, last modified June 29, 2022, <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2022/06/lgbtq-lawmakers-win-primaries-3-states/>.

<sup>6</sup> Brody Levesque, "Anti-LGBTQ+ Bills Passed by Oklahoma State Senate," *Washington Blade*, last modified March 24, 2022, <https://www.washingtonblade.com/2022/03/24/anti-lgbtq-bills-passed-by-oklahoma-state-senate/>.

We have made plans for Sue to visit the Queer cooperative I am moving into in Lawrence, plans to attend some underground dance parties in Tulsa, and plans to organize together to leverage queer elder's voices in this next round of political fights we have in front of us. I cannot wait to introduce her to new friends and colleagues in the field of Queer history. Like a good Aries, I also have a few highly improbable goals like interviewing Jane Fonda and reconnecting Sue with Cleve Jones and others she worked with in San Francisco. Sue has survived multiple attacks upon her body, numerous bouts of cancer, and COVID on three separate occasions. She is tough, but she is also aging. I know my goals may be lofty and that Sue may not even be around to see all of them come to fruition, but I am comforted by returning back to Jen Jack Giesking's understanding of Queer relationships:

Even when their limited number of lesbian-queer stars fall out of view (pollution, racism, isolation, violence, loss, cis-heteropatriarchy, or the astronomer's "zone of avoidance," when your location on Earth blocks the view of the stars beyond your horizon), they continue to burn bright in physical, remembered, and even imagined worlds. And even long after stars eventually burn out or implode, the light can still reach us in memories, stories, and relationships.<sup>7</sup>

Sue's light is not hidden under a bush. It is too bright for that. Now, her historical legacy can begin to catch up to her fierceness. The lessons I have learned from and with Sue will stick with me forever. She showcased that *it is often the ones who think their story is "nothing special" that we have the most to learn from* and serves as a reminder that Queer Okies *are as vast and unique as an Oklahoma sunset*. Her story contains moments of trauma and harm inflicted on her body and others that she cares about and reminds us that *even when you are scared, there is work to be done* and that *even when it is hard, they deserve to be remembered*. Sue's history with police violence solidified my opinions that *All Cops are Bullies, Antagonizers, unSafe, Arrogant, unTrustworthy, Aggressive, Regressive, Dregs on Society*, and her legacy exemplifies that *Oklahoma Queers have been vital to Queer culture overall*. She has seen more horrors than

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<sup>7</sup> Giesking, 947.

anyone should have to witness, verifying that *loss stays with you, and its okay to feel it* and that *it is okay to leave* a place that does not celebrate you. Her community building skills and care for others modeled that *family is what you make it*. A lifetime of lesbian visibility from Sue reminds others around her that *if you can see it, you can be it and more*. She has failed by Oklahoma's conservative standards, highlighting that *failure can be the best thing that ever happens to you* and reminded me that we can *leave no one behind* in the fight for Queer liberation. Lastly, I hope this is clear to all, *Queer People are sacred and holy* and should be treated as such.

Working with queer elders expanded my idea of what it means to do this work as a traumatized queer Oklahoman. It is not just about recording their stories but engaging in conversations that bridge gaps in generational understanding. It is about laughing and then crying through traumatic recollections and making sure they are safe during ice storms. It's about knowing when to stop asking questions to give the narrator time to recoup. Sometimes we met with the intention of recording together, but instead just sat in community without my recorder. To be granted access to queer elder's emotions and memories in these ways can be powerful and challenging because, "as memory work can offer the opportunity for queer narrators to connect with previous generations, it can also bring back to emotional life the feelings associated with unjust loss and death."<sup>8</sup> It is exhausting for everyone when we get together, not because we do not enjoy each other's company, but because we all feel an urgency in making visible what has not been, preserving their legacies. We all know the cycles of history and where we are currently sitting in the arc. We all know harder times are ahead and that the experiences they have gone through will be helpful for present and future activists who are picking up the torch and working to break cycles of trauma supported by our families, state, and nation.

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<sup>8</sup> Boyd and Roque Ramirez, *Bodies of Evidence*, 9.



Since beginning this Public History program the world has shifted in so many ways. I will never know what it was like in a graduate program without the weight of a pandemic weighing down on us. I wonder if Queer academics growing the field in the late twentieth century felt a similar way with HIV breathing down their necks, taking their loved ones rapidly, and watching the government and the academy pay little attention to the traumas being inflicted on their bodies. Some days, I wake up and the idea of subjecting myself to another version of the horrors cast upon my ancestors and elders is too much to carry. It sometimes feels impossible to keep uncovering these truths, knowing we are still stuck in cycles that were harming us then, in the now. On days like that, I try to remember why I do this work.

If I had a dollar for every time I made someone cry while talking about my work, I would have enough dollars for a drag queen to consider it a good set. While writing this draft alone, I have made at least ten people I care about sob. But it happens with strangers or new acquaintances too. Recently, I attended a Queer folk concert at the Woody Guthrie Center. Crys Matthews and Heather Mae were incredible. Hearing them together felt like I had been transported back in time to hear a young Cass Elliot and Tracy Chapman sing love songs to each other.

I got there early and got a seat in the front row. A friend was supposed to come with me but needed to cancel last minute, I went anyways. If you have never been in the performance space at the Guthrie Center, you are missing out. It is so quaint and intimate. According to Crys and Heather, the acoustics are wild as well. What I assumed was a sold-out show was actually an audience of four or five people total. I'll never forget that evening. I cried and clapped and sang with them when they asked us to. At the end, they asked us if we wanted to say anything or if we had any questions. I didn't have a question, but I did have something in my bag that I wanted to share with them.

I had brought with me the White Night Flyer that I purchased on Ebay a few weeks prior. As a self-identified Queer Witch, I have a very intentional Queer Ancestral altar.<sup>9</sup> It is my favorite place in my home. My version of a family portrait wall. When not being used, the flyer now hangs on the wall about my altar space. I brought it with me that night to charge it with liberation music, in the house that holds Woody's memories. Like a good historian, I was longwinded about the history around it and why I had it with me. The man sitting in the front row with me asked if he could look at it, with tears in his eyes. I handed him the framed item and he started telling us about his uncle. This uncle lived in San Francisco and died there from AIDS related complications before he ever got to meet him. He expressed that he thought about him often and wanted to make him proud, he wanted to know him. As he sobbed, he thanked me and said, "this is the closest I have ever felt to him." I told him that "you know him. He is part of you. Find a photo and give him space to be remembered." This is why I do this work. Okie Queer elders deserve to be remembered. To be thanked for putting their bodies on the line. For being brave enough to climb out of the boxes that society tries to fit us in.

"All of this has happened before."<sup>10</sup> We are currently dealing with high levels of open discrimination in our society. The Supreme Court has overturned *Roe vs. Wade* and several other decisions that take away bodily autonomy for many in our society, especially BIPOC, Transgender, and Queer people with vulvas. Monkeypox has moved from a rumor to over five thousand cases worldwide and continuing to spread at an alarming rate.<sup>11</sup> While it is not only affecting men who sleep with men, it is spreading through our community and receiving very little coverage, much like the early years of the AIDS epidemic. While I am not sure of what is

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<sup>9</sup> Kelly M. Marshall, "The Rise of the Queer Witch," *Spectrum South*, last modified March 10, 2020, <https://www.spectrumsouth.com/rise-queer-witch/>.

<sup>10</sup> Wikipedia, s.v. "Battlestar Galactica," last modified July 6, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battlestar\\_Galactica](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battlestar_Galactica).

<sup>11</sup> Teddy Grant, Mary Kekatos, and Arielle Mitropoulos, "Monkeypox cases up 77% in 1 Week: WHO," *ABC News*, last modified July 7, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/monkeypox-cases-77-week/story?id=86415761>.

ahead in the coming years, I do know one thing. Queer people have always existed and will continue to exist, as long as there are stars in the sky or Oklahoma sunsets.

Carol Mason's work has created a path for mine in a way I will be forever grateful for. It only seems fitting to end this first attempt with her words of wisdom. I hope this work has done justice to her argument that "there is political power in seeing the past in present or the future in the present."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Mason, 140.

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