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Localizing Resistance: How Southern Women Locate Sexual and Bodily Autonomy and Strategically Resist the Institutions Aiming to Shape Them

Gillian Raley

Honors Thesis for the Department of Sociology

Bowdoin College, 2021

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Localizing Resistance: How Southern Women Locate Sexual and Bodily Autonomy and Strategically Resist the Institutions that Aim to Shape Them

This paper analyzes the methods of resistance enacted by women-identifying people in Mississippi against the institutions seeking to police how they understand their own sexuality and bodily autonomy. This analysis draws upon a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in the summer of 2020 focused on construction of community, intersectional identity, relationship with the body, and what inputs frame how women in Mississippi understand sex. This project puts these interviews in conversation with literature from a variety of subfields, including resistance studies, the Sociology of the South, and the Sociology of sexuality, all of which help bring the argument behind these data to light. Resistance looks different in different eras, and generally scholars like to analyze resistance as collective action, collective voice, collective struggle. These data instead argue that strategic, individualized resistance is just as vital to marginalized bodies, particularly when explosive action is not possible. Studying strategies of resistance that lurk beneath the surface not only expands what we now see as “radical,” but it also lends insight into where lasting change can begin.

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Introduction

The movie *Fried Green Tomatoes* hung like a specter over my childhood. Something was haunting in its nostalgia, something deeply satisfying, and there was something about its depiction of Southern women that I was not ready to see in myself. The story centers around the relationship between Idgie and Ruth, two young women building an intimate connection to one another in 1930s Birmingham, Alabama. In flashbacks between the then-present-day 1980s and long-ago 1930s, a much older Idgie recounts stories to a new friend about an everlasting, life-giving love between women that beautifully blurred the boundaries between platonic friendship and romance. Idgie herself only implies the sexual nature of their relationship but is sure to emphasize its completeness and vitality. They enact fierce physical protection over one another. They skinny-dip in the creek late into the night. They bake apple pies together and somehow end up on the floor, covered in flour, holding each other tight. Their story weaves itself naturally into the tapestry of its time and place. The film depicts their love as natural, inevitable, and inherently unoffensive to their conservative Alabaman community. Their town only starts to pay attention to their intimate bond when they suspect Idgie, in her passion for Ruth, of murdering Ruth's abusive husband. Otherwise, their relationship is universally recognized by their community as sacred, beautiful – a fascinatingly true depiction of queerness in a place like rural Alabama. The film provocatively theorizes that women in the South don't merely bend to the many hegemonic structures that seek to pigeonhole their personhood. Even women who externally submit to a scripted, polite existence are actively finding ways to resist such structures. The main characters in this film showcase an unconventional version of resistance and learn to locate unadulterated joy.

Much scholarship has been published on resistance – its purpose, utility, function, and emotionality (Hollander 2004, Raby 2005, Williams 2009, Haenfler 2014). Scholars have long acknowledged that resistance takes many forms. Sometimes to resist is to organize a sit-in. Other

times, to resist is to mentally process an event in an empowering way. Resistance studies generally pay more attention to the public, explosive iterations of people “sticking it” to the powers that be. What resistance scholar wouldn’t be endlessly fascinated by the collective effervescence of a massive protest rally? Who wouldn’t want to focus one’s research on the organizers of a social movement, or the leaders wielding bullhorns in front of a critical mass? In truth, when you constantly listen to that bullhorn, you aren’t listening to the voices going un-broadcasted. Additionally, we end up hearing the least from people in locations where almost no one wields a bullhorn. These locations tend to be poorer, more rural, more religious, and more politically conservative. These locations tend to be forgotten as frequently as they occur.

I grew up in one of these locations. I spent my childhood in Jackson, Mississippi attending a religious private school in a relatively conservative community. Mississippi itself, even counting the capital of Jackson, is an incredibly rural state. This project offers a case study to understand how resistance manifests in a location of this type – a location where bullhorns are far from ubiquitous.

The central theory of this research project is that collective action, as a form of resistance, is not always possible. In many communities across the globe, resisting in a public, collective setting will reverse freedom for the oppressed rather than expand it. People living under intense institutional control, however, do not simply bend to the limits placed upon them. When you look more closely, you will find that they have located alternative pathways to resist. I came to this conclusion through my research on how women growing up in Mississippi come to assert sexual and bodily autonomy. The women I interviewed for this project grew up under the gaze of structural patriarchy, heteronormative violence, racism, and conservative religion. I was not sure what I expected to find in analyzing these data. But their experiences, stories, and viewpoints compelled me to see that something more meaningful lurked beneath the surface. Each had located an individualized pathway to confirm their existence as a sexual being, and this confirmation actively

pushed back on the institutions seeking to define them. There is certainly debate as to whether small acts of resistance suffice in the lives of those combating oppression. This paper examines what kinds and degrees of resistance are “enough” for these women. Interestingly, the small acts of resistance I can identify within these data were rarely labeled as such by my interviewees. Still, they are acts of resistance that point to mechanisms of institutional power and structural oppression.

This central theory then brought up a lengthy series of questions I set out to answer. The first grouping of questions has to do with agency and bodily autonomy, or a lack thereof. How do young women growing up in Mississippi assert agency in their sexual lives? Do they perceive themselves as sexual beings? How do they conceptualize bodily autonomy, and how does this conceptualization shape how they move throughout the world? The second grouping of questions has to do with how these systems of power dole out methods of control along racial, class, and religious boundaries. Where do we situate these sociological questions in historical terms? How do systems of power assert control today, and how have these strategies evolved? How intimately do these women understand such structures and how to subvert them?

The importance of seeking out answers to these many questions cannot be overstated. The subfield of human sexuality within the field of Sociology is a fairly new site of study. Thus far, scholars have focused mostly on urban spaces when trying to better understand human sexuality in the context of social constructions. Instead, this project centers a rural, politically conservative, and racially diverse locale, one relentlessly scapegoated by retellings of American history and descriptions of “backward” elements of America’s present. Mississippi as a location serves as a case study to better understand other conservative locations, wherever they may be.

I will first engage in an overview of the body of scholarship that informed this project. This body comes from a combination of resistance studies, the Sociology of the South, and the Sociology of sexuality. I will then move into a brief overview of the methodology that guided this research,

including why and how I decided to focus on in-depth, qualitative interview data. My analysis discusses the two overarching themes within my data: how sex is framed in the lives of these women, and how their strategies of resistance emerge. Finally, I will unpack why any of this matters, and how this project closes an existing gap in both the field of Sociology.

Context of Resistance

Strategies of resistance against structures that police gender and sexuality come in unbelievable variety. A large body of scholarship dedicates space to unpacking these strategies in the American/Western sociopolitical context, including the work of Scott (1992) and Foucault (1976). Another body of scholarship seeks to understand conceptions of resistance abroad, taking into account the local histories and sociopolitical contexts of communities in the Middle East, East Asia, and the like (Abu-Lughod 1990; Kandiyoti 1988). However, very little space has been set aside for developing an understanding of the localized nature of resistance within the vast range of sociopolitical contexts within the U.S., especially localized strategies for resisting the structures that police gender and sexuality in more conservative places. This paper will explore the significance of understanding resistance in a localized context by understanding resistance in the American South.

On the question of how marginalized groups weave resistance into their everyday lives, Scott (1992) theorizes that there exist a series of hidden transcripts in every iteration of structural oppression. When thinking about this theory in conjunction with Foucault's (1976) diagnostics of power, we can access a more nuanced dialogue on how the presence of resistant acts can communicate a great deal about the power structures they aim to resist. Foucault (1976) also identifies how sexuality can be weaponized against the structures that police it. Abu-Lughod (1990) echoes Foucault's theory in saying that studies of resistance are "ultimately more concerned with finding resisters and explaining resistance than with examining power" and as such, "they do not

explore as fully as they might the implications of the forms of resistance they locate” (Abu-Lughod 41). This project takes Abu-Lughod’s point into account, exploring what these forms of resistance reveal about the lives of Southern women. The individualized, privatized nature of these acts tells us a great deal about just how invasive and insidious these structures can be in their policing of bodies.

Scott (1992) also theorizes that a “public transcript,” or the larger society’s understanding of a certain marginalized group’s narrative, complements the hidden one. Marginalized groups strategically construct this public transcript in ways that will benefit them. My data confirm this kind of strategic construction by women, particularly queer women, in the American South. This public transcript strategically misrepresents reality in a way that discourages risking the upheaval of revolution and simultaneously allows for the construction of safe, empowering communities amidst the South’s more general hostility to open, honest sexual expression. Additionally, my data confirm the reality of Scott’s theory on hidden transcripts and how they function in both individualized and universal ways. A sense of shared reality permeated all the stories I heard, a shared reality that transcended certain apparent divisions like race, class, and personal faith. These women were not part of some vast network of communication where they work to sync the retelling of their experiences with one another. Not only did many of their narratives echo the others, but their methods of resistance did as well. I don’t argue that these women consciously weaponize their sexuality against their oppressors like Foucault so grandly states. Still, I argue that these hidden transcripts, these shared methodologies, are weapons nonetheless.

The absence of a clear consciousness in how these women wield their weapons of narrative power and sexual expression has everything to do with their localized context. Kandiyoti (1988) studies the methods of resistance enacted by women worldwide, mostly in East and South Asian communities. While much of her discussion privileges the localized aspects of these places, she argues that women, when faced with the potential of a new social order, “often resist the process of

transition because they see the old normative order slipping away from them without any empowering alternatives” (Kandiyoti 282). Resistance involves a concerted calculation of best interests. Kandiyoti provides examples of rapid industrialization in places like Bangladesh and rural China, which has subsequently created a situation where younger and younger men leave their families to enter the workforce. Though the gender hierarchies within families have begun to weaken as a result, many women actually resent the new order. They have lost significant bargaining chips in this new order and can’t use the strategies they once did to leverage power (281-2). For the women in my data set, specifically the white women who benefit from racial privilege, blowing up the patriarchy altogether leaves them with an incredibly foggy picture of what would remain. Still, resistance serves an essential function in releasing the bits of tension oppression creates. In following Abu-Lughod’s framework as well, going beyond analyzing the acts alone and taking very seriously the larger significance of these acts, we have the potential to unlock new information about how we might dismantle these powerful institutions. In framing the study of resistance in this way, we might see that we are not as far from theorizing revolution as might be feared.

As evidenced by my data and Mississippi’s particular sociopolitical landscape, none of these conclusions about resistance, transgression, or revolution can be separated from this place’s local context, politics, history, and ways of being. What fits the definition of transgressive in places like Chicago or New York City, especially in gender expression and queerness, could easily be life-threatening in a place like Mississippi. Bruce (2016) identifies the importance of localization when defining transgressive politics, arguing that even though a twenty-minute, exceedingly tame pride parade in South Dakota can’t hold a candle to the in-your-face debauchery of a pride parade in New York City, locating the small parade in the context of South Dakota renders that act incredibly transgressive within the normative order. Similarly, Abu-Lughod (1990) identifies the importance of constructing theories that give women “credit for resisting in a variety of creative ways ... without

either misattributing to them forms of consciousness or politics that are not part of their experience – something like a feminist consciousness or feminist politics – or devaluing their practices as pre-political, primitive, or even misguided” (Abu-Lughod 47). The methods of resistance used by women in Mississippi need to be understood in a way that, as Abu-Lughod states, ties in the Southern sociopolitical context and doesn’t assume a radical political framework that simply isn’t part of these women’s lives.

Foucault (1976) powerfully and controversially asserted that “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault 6). He articulates that the presence of resistance signals power and that the same sentiment in the opposite direction is true. He structures the assertion in this way on purpose, prompting us to “question our understanding of power as always and essentially repressive” (Abu-Lughod 42). My data argue that while the presence of resistance in the lives of Mississippian women points to the existence of oppressive power, the presence of resistance also proves that these women *can* resist. That is no small fact. Foucault specifically dug into the resistance of structures that police sexuality, writing that “if sex is repressed, ... then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming of freedom” (Foucault 6). Sex is indeed systematically repressed in American society, often in manipulatively subtle ways, but Mississippi is in a class by itself when it comes to sexual repression. And yet, my data overwhelmingly show that women in Mississippi are, in their own lives, anticipating the coming of freedom.

Situating the South

So, then, what frameworks do pervade Mississippi’s sociopolitical landscape? How distinct is the South when it comes to American history, politics, and gender policing? Why is it worthwhile to

study how Southern women understand their gender and sexuality? On the question of the South's regional distinction, Abbott (1983) writes that "lately I go home in panic, for fear the South is gone. ... But when I am home, it always calms me to see that Southern cities, however slick and new, don't quite seem citified" (Abbott 210). Abbott writes with this sense that the South is a "figure" in the lives of Southerners, and the power of a distinctly Southern subjectivity is alive and well. Jansson (2007) theorizes that "the force of Southern history" plays an essential role in shaping this Southern subjectivity in that it "makes Southerners keenly aware of their limitations" (Jansson 408). In literature, art, music, and all forms of Southern artistic expression, one finds echoes of "the evocative figure of a 'South' haunted by its dark and troubled past," standing in contrast with the idea of "America' as a beacon of hope and symbol of material progress" (Jansson 401). Every part of the Southern identity is touched by this evocative figure, for better and for worse. Abbott writes that for Southern women, in particular, there is no escaping the generations of dark and difficult history, a history that is explicitly racialized, gendered, and full of violence. She says, "Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge hidden in every cell of our bodies" (Abbott 1). They are even present in innocuous moments, in "a quirk of speech, a way of folding a shirt," shaping a subjectivity that is at once lovely and bittersweet.

Embedded in Southern subjectivity is the idea that there are, in reality, multiple "Souths." The concept of the "Southerner" and, for this paper, the "Southern woman" is constantly intersecting with boundaries of race, class, religion, and all other salient components of one's identity. Literature in particular, including the art of storytelling, has played a vital role in portraying these multiple subjectivities. Southern storytelling represents the heart of Southern sociology for it identifies the nexus of Southern culture and hidden Southern subjectivities. Hawks and Skemp (2011) hypothesize that "we Southerners, perhaps more than other Americans, enjoy making up stories about ourselves. ... When we have no evidence we make up stories – and indeed sometimes

when we *do* have evidence, we still make up stories” (Hawks and Skemp 95). For Southern women, these stories continue to shape the meaning of these multiple “Souths.” Writer and legend Toni Morrison worked to capture the South that Black women experienced in her many writings. In one interview, Morrison explains the two main characters Sula and Nel, in the novel *Sula*. “Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be” (Hawks and Skemp 92). Morrison’s novels present a diverse set of ways that Southern Black women choose to be. But she also articulates the overarching reality that Black women, given no reason to believe they could achieve freedom and triumph, had to invent new ways of being. We can additionally look to the anthologies of Black feminist thought to grasp realities of intersectionality and Southern Black womanhood. When we understand race, gender, and class hierarchies as interlocking, as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) theorized, we are also able to further understand the multitude of subjectivities that exist. Regionality acts as yet another interlocking feature, creating even more specific modes of being and adding to the complexity of Southern sociology.

On the other hand, Hawks and Skemp identify how the Southern white woman, “the image of all that is treasured by the dominant culture, the repository of the virtues of passive beauty and quietude, ... has not experienced the ironic benefits of cultural invisibility” (Hawks and Skemp 92-3). It will instead be her mission “not so much her Black sister’s need to sustain a voice through suppression and victimization, but instead, the need to find a voice at all” (92-3). These intentionally constructed subjectivities have gone largely unstudied in the context of the South. Still, it is worth noting that when Southern womanhood receives academic attention, a white Southern subjectivity takes center-stage, as does a heteronormative one.

Various forces have worked to maintain this racist and homophobic framing and have been cementing this fabricated reality for centuries. Foucault (1976) argues that the systematic repression

of sex “[coincides] with the development of capitalism” and “becomes an integral part of the bourgeois order” (Foucault 6). At its core, sexuality and the notion that sex can be had for pleasure are “incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative,” making the capitalist bourgeois order reluctant to promote expressive sexuality. In Mississippi specifically, and America as a whole, the constructed bourgeois system relies heavily on white supremacist assumptions and institutional religion that privileges heterosexuality and gender conformity. Both the whitewashing of sexuality in the South and the sexual repression that pervades the lives of Southern women come from the strategic, capital-driven constructions of sex that Foucault identifies.

My data does not seek to ignore the importance of studying the subjectivity of white Southern women, nor the subjectivity of straight women. Nevertheless, it does problematize the widespread academic focus on this perspective. My data include multiple narratives on the experience of white, straight Southern womanhood while scholars have objectively not studied this intersection of identities extensively. However, this project also includes narratives that land outside of this intersection and uses those subjectivities to complicate any conclusive theories on resistance.

Institutional religion in Mississippi also plays an essential role in shaping the narratives around Southern womanhood and sexuality. Barton (2012) coins the terminology of the “Bible Belt panopticon” to describe states like Mississippi in which Christianity permeates almost every aspect of society. This panopticon, she theorizes, creates an environment in which young LGBTQ people must police their behavior, expression, and movement. As an extension, the expression of sexuality itself is policed and regulated. Studying homeless queer youth in Texas, Robinson (2020) traces how institutions heavily influenced by Christianity, such as schools, churches, and families, assert power through violence and, even more efficiently, through the threat of violence. As a more basic example, they note that “we can think of women who do not walk alone at night as a way that violence – or the fear of violence – constitutes the meaning of womanhood” because “violence, as

an instrument of marking difference, maintains relations of domination and subordination” (Robinson 59-60). To go even deeper into markers of domination and subordination within gendered structures, Robinson argues that “bullying through gender policing reinscribes the gender binary as the dominant mode of gender relations within society” and that even “the fear of experiencing [bullying] shapes how they view themselves in relation to others” (Robinson 60).

For queer women and gender non-conforming people who grew up in religious, conservative households, no matter where in the world that took place, these themes are likely salient. However, the South’s cultural landscape, and in particular Mississippi’s, boasts the presence of hegemonic, institutionalized religion that exerts power over the lives of everyone in the community, regardless of their personal beliefs or upbringing. This culturally embedded institution creates a narrative around normative ways of being and enforces normativity through violence, or the threat of violence. This idea folds into my data as another central theme. All of my interviewees, even those who did not have a personal or familial connection to religion while they were growing up, cited the institution of religion, specifically Christianity, as something that significantly shaped how they moved throughout the world. In the “Bible Belt panopticon,” religion exerts influence over school curricula, enforces the gender binary, and defines normative and non-normative sexuality. Mississippi fits this mold precisely and serves as an ideal location to investigate these structures further.

Piecing together the existing scholarship on Southern identity, Southern womanhood, and the multitude of “Souths” that exist, it remains clear that Southern-ness is fluid, ever-evolving, and shaped by history as well as the institutions that have endured. Understanding the burden of Southern history is an integral part of understanding Southern womanhood, as is thinking of the South as a physical location with multiple realities and multiple subjectivities. The positionalities and political languages of marginalized communities in the South should never be studied in a context

that is misaligned with the cultural and political realities of the region. What's more, the "hidden transcripts" and "public transcripts" of all women, including queer women, in Mississippi can only be accurately interrogated within a localizing framework. This research and this paper will fill this gap that, bridging Sociology, gender studies, and Southern studies to investigate questions of resistance, institutional control, and individual agency in the lives of women from Mississippi.

Methodology

The research draws on interview data conducted with sixteen women who grew up in Mississippi. Outsiders tend to characterize Mississippi as the "deepest" of the Deep South, a true crossroads of what the South represents. It has a reputation of being among the most conservative Southern states with prominent stains of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. At the same time, more Black people reside in Mississippi than in any other state in the nation, making up 39% of the state's population, and far more queer people call Mississippi home than the average person might expect (Black Demographics, 2017). As of 2020, a Gallup poll estimates that around 3.5% of Mississippi's adult population identifies as LGBTQ+, which equals about 99,000 people (Movement Advancement Project, 2020). Mississippi physically contains a coastline, a hill country, vast swaths of arable land, a historic city, and thick forests teeming with life. People-wise, its residents share a sharp sense of collective experience. It is both a state of sameness, of slow-cooked meals and valued tradition, and a state of extreme contradiction, where the capital city can be run by a former Black Panther while a Confederate sympathizer governs the state. Because of its extremes and its contradictions, it provides an incredibly interesting and compelling lens through which to examine questions of sex, sexuality, and gender expression for women-identifying people. It is also a fascinating place to investigate how rural, predominantly conservative populations conceptualize of sexuality, and how processes of resistance have taken shape.

While taking a class on the Sociology of Sexuality, I was intrigued by the lack of research directed at understanding the ways people growing up in rural areas come to understand themselves as sexual beings. In Jackson, Mississippi, a city only in name, locals would always joke that we lived in the smallest “big city” in the world. And so, with Jackson being the biggest city for three hours by car in any direction, Mississippi is, to outsiders, one big soybean field.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 Election created challenges in recruitment and conducting interviews. To build my interview sample, I relied on the snowball method, drawing on my relationships with women I grew up with to connect with women outside of my closest circles. This method relied on my personal connections as the single starting point and rippled outward from there. Ideally, I would have been able to gain contacts from multiple starting points, but this proved quite challenging given the pandemic’s larger societal constraints. Even in a pandemic, with hospitality feeling absent in most corners of the world, the people I connected with for this project were incredibly forthcoming and willing to introduce me to others.

My sample consisted of sixteen people who identify as women in ways that are meaningful to them. They are from all over the state, from the hill regions of Tupelo and Oxford, to the Delta’s rolling farmland, to the sleepy city of Jackson. A slight majority of them are white, which demographically is a slightly whiter sample than would match the demographics of the state. Four interviewees identified as Black, one identified as Latinx, and one identified as Asian-American. An overall majority of them are queer, with sixty percent identifying as such, which does not reflect the 3.5% of Mississippians that outwardly claim queer identities (although, we can only speculate at how much higher these percentages might be under more accepting conditions). All of my interviewees identified as cisgender women, and I believe my findings would have benefitted from the inclusion of trans voices in this discourse. Additionally, all of my interviewees located themselves on the center-left end of the political spectrum. I reached out to a variety of conservative women’s

organizations in the state in an effort to diversify the political ideologies of my sample, but each organization ignored by modes of contact.

All aspects of my interview process were approved in advance by Bowdoin College's Institutional Research Board (IRB). I made sure to protect the identities of my interviewees using multiple safeguards, and I laid out these methods to each interviewee. If they consented to having the interview recorded, I let them know that the audio copy would be deleted immediately after I finished transcribing its entirety. Their names would not appear anywhere on the transcription, and within the paper, I would only refer to them using a randomly generated number. I let each interviewee know that, particularly within the paper, I would not include any information that would allow others to identify them. Every single one of my interviewees responded positively to these terms, and I got the sense from each of them that they trusted me to follow these guidelines.

About half of these interviews were conducted virtually, and the other half occurred in-person under Covid-safe precautions. All in-person interviews were conducted outdoors with a ten-foot distance between the interviewee and me. They lasted on average 40 minutes each, with a couple only lasting twenty minutes and others clocking in at over an hour. I made a point of letting the length of these interviews lie in the hands of each individual interviewee, and this allowed for a greater sense of trust between us as well as a deeper, richer set of details. My semi-structured interview script consisted of sixteen questions. With the first few, I worked to gain a sense of the type of community the interviewee grew up in, including their socioeconomic status, racial identity, school environment, and the political ideologies of those surrounding them. I then moved into even more open-ended questions about how religion had impacted their life, their identification with queerness, and how their sexual education had shaped their relationship with their body. While exploring sex and sexuality was immensely uncomfortable for some, for others the act of processing

their experiences came as a relief. One of my more abstract goals going into this research was to holistically understand how women growing up in Mississippi process and contextualize their sexual and romantic experiences, so every time an interviewee simply wanted to keep telling me stories, I was there to listen. In addition to this, at the beginning of every interview, I assured my interviewee that no answer they gave could be deemed “incorrect” and that anything they were willing to share with me would undoubtedly prove helpful. I hoped to create a welcoming space each time and this required me to rely on my emotional senses at every turn.

Findings

My interviewees were more open to exploring their personal experiences than I ever expected. A select few had, over the course of their own lives, worked through the answers to the questions I posed about sexuality and bodily autonomy knowingly and purposefully. Those few remarked that growing up in Mississippi gave them a lot to work through, especially with regards to their own conceptions of sex and sexuality. I also had a group of interviewees who had never or rarely reflected on their conceptions of these topics. This was far from a perfect correlation, but most of the people who fell into the second category had elected to stay in Mississippi after graduating high school. Those in the first category had not.

Those in both categories equally had a great deal to say. I quickly became aware that some of my interviewees were processing their experiences in real time right in front of me. I felt incredibly honored to be part of their journey, even if this experience for them was merely a stepping-stone. I hoped to create an inviting atmosphere for these conversations, free of judgment. The most popular topic of conversation across these interviews was the massive failings of the sex education curriculum in Mississippi. Each school seemed to have something particular that it got wrong in this process, but across the board, my interviewees were far from satisfied. They were each forced to

seek out remedial education anywhere they could. Sometimes this remedial education warped their understandings of sexuality even more. But more often than not, it allowed a sense of control over their bodies and how they might see themselves.

A myriad of other forces set out to shape how my interviewees conceptualized sexuality. I identified these as religious institutions, familial politics, entertainment media, peers, and the Internet. Each of these agents functioned differently for each interviewee. For some, entertainment media provided an overall positive space to relearn sexuality in an empowering way. For others, though, presentations of sexuality within the media did more harm than good. Much of the data I collected was quite person-dependent, quite individualized. This reality confirmed the importance of my hyper-individualized methodology. It also confirmed the individualized nature of resistance in a context like Mississippi.

My data fill in the gaps as to what localized forms of resistance look like in Mississippi and how these forms are constrained by each person's understanding of cultural normality. We've explored how Mississippi as a cultural location shapes the ways its children live, breathe, and move throughout the world and how those messages are relayed across racialized, gendered, religious, and classed boundaries. Because there is, in reality, a multitude of "Souths," it would follow that there are a multitude of strategies enacted by Southern women to embody resistance. Most of the time these strategies are products of the intersecting identities that coalesce in any given person, but sometimes these strategies are shaped by personality. My data overwhelmingly show that these strategies of resistance are nuanced, and that each individual raised within a singular culture will craft an understanding of themselves in an agentic way. These strategies exist on a spectrum, and they are formed in creatively authentic ways.

Drawing on these data, I now turn to a discussion of the agents of socialization through which women in Mississippi learn about sex, gender, and sexuality.

Framing Sex

We first must examine the different modes through which women in Mississippi receive information about sex, sexuality, and how they are meant to exist in their own bodies. I categorized these modes into six discreet groups: religion, parents, peers, movies/TV, the Internet, and formal sex education. In particular, institutionalized religion and formal sex education seek to shape how these women conceptualize of sexuality.

First, my data show that religious institutions in Mississippi have a significant impact on the ways women in the state understand themselves as sexual beings. This is true even for women who did not grow up in a religious family or personally identify as religious. Religion, specifically Christianity, is institutionalized in Mississippi's culture in a way that touches every person who grows up in the state. Within my data, a specific set of discourses stood out that my interviewees connected to their experiences with religion in Mississippi. The institution argues, both covertly and overtly, that women should not have sex until marriage, that women should socialize and choose sexual partners among those who share their religious beliefs (the "right" kinds of people), and that women should assimilate to the particular cultures within their denomination. What's more, in Mississippi, different kinds of religiosity propagate a range of different opinions on abortion rights and on LGBTQ rights, giving a variety of takes on the level of bodily autonomy women should have. In one sense, institutionalized Christianity in Mississippi sets forth a universalized message on how women are meant to exist in social spaces. But in another sense, the range of messaging in different churches and different denominations complicates the existence of a generalized narrative on womanhood. The experiences of my interviewees proved that both of these realities can and do exist in tandem, and these women hold space for both to be true.

The second major actor in shaping how these women conceive of their own sexualities is the "formal" sex education occurring in Mississippi schools. It was not until 2012 that the state of

Mississippi mandated that sex education be taught in local schools within House Bill 999, and with this mandate came a set of regulations on what sex ed teachers are allowed to include in their curricula. A school can either choose an “Abstinence Only” curriculum or one called “Abstinence Plus.” “Abstinence Only” functions exactly as it sounds – there is to be no discussion of contraceptives, and no assumption that any of the students will choose to have sex. “Abstinence Plus” offers a little more wiggle room, allowing for some discussion of contraception and sexually transmitted diseases. What was revealed over the course of my research, however, is that none of the women I spoke to had school-based sexual education that fit neatly into either of these boxes. All of the women I interviewed were somewhere between the ages of 19 and 23, meaning they were in some of the first sex ed classes taught following the state-wide regulatory mandate in 2012. Gathering these data through long form interviews also allowed me to answer a very important question: what do these women remember from their sex ed classes all these years down the road, and how did they resist the patterns of disempowerment in what they learned?

Almost every person I spoke to prefaced their discussion of their own personal experience in school-based sex education by saying they never truly had formal sex education at all. This statement was usually followed by a description of what their school thought was a sufficient amount of information to provide on sex and sexuality, but judging by the overwhelming consensus that “formal” sex ed never really occurred, it became clear that these interviewees believed that information insufficient. Even for Interviewee 11, who could clearly remember that her school had opted to use the “Abstinence Plus” curriculum, the teacher told students to “not have sex – also, this is what a condom is, [but] don’t use it until you’re married” (11, pg. 1). The students “weren’t even allowed to see how to use a condom. They could not physically demonstrate the act of rolling a condom on a banana to us” (11, pg. 1). To anyone in a state with a remotely helpful sex ed curriculum, the condom-banana demonstration is universally known as a staple, with people

frequently joking about its ubiquity. But even in Mississippi's most robust curriculum option, a contraceptive as common as a condom is too inappropriate to include. A vast majority of my interviewees also remembered the teachers separating the class into boys and girls before any part of formal sex education could begin. House Bill 999, the one passed in 2012 for the purpose of mandating and regulating sex education, required this gendered separation by law. This reality points to a concerted effort on the part of state lawmakers to shape the ways women should conceive of sexuality separately from how men might.

The women I spoke to had vivid recollections of how their formal sex education taught them to understand themselves in largely disempowering ways. Across the different communities in Mississippi that these women grew up in, sex was framed as “this process that happens that has no relation to you – you’ll probably never do it” (12, pg. 2). Interviewee 10 said that her school-based sex education was quite literally nothing more than “a survey which had maybe one or two questions about if we had ever been pressured to do something sexual” (10, pg. 1). In retelling this memory, she also recalled the emotions that bubbled up. “To this day,” she says, “I am still furious that they got away with calling that education. I went several years after that not understanding many things about my body or the things I would need to do to protect myself, and I’m sure many other students were the same way” (10, pg. 1). In the survey questions she mentions, there is a great deal to unpack regarding the assumptions that authority figures make about how and why young women engage in sexual activity. The idea that young women should be worried that they will be “pressured” into having sex is juxtaposed with the message that, outside of a situation in which you are pressured, sex has no relation to you. The marriage of these two messages confounds logic and leaves no room for sexuality to coexist with the construct of “Southern womanhood.” As Interviewee 12 puts it, “when your sex ed is really removed from your experience but also emphasizes female objectivity and

fragility, it's not a very comforting view of your own body. ... [Your body] is like a thing that can be invaded, and if it's invaded, then you've done something wrong" (12, pg. 6).

Discussion of the ways women in locations like Mississippi, and, realistically, in all locations, are trained to understand their bodies would be incomplete without acknowledging and unpacking the presence of sexual violence. In Mississippi and locations similar to it, the experience of being proximate to or a victim of sexual violence confirms the rhetoric that these institutions build around sex. The experience of sexual violence demands a process of healing, a process of reconceptualization, and a process of finding meaning. It is in some ways an obstacle standing in the way of enacting resistance, but it is in other ways a catalyst demanding change. For most of my interviewees, it was some combination of the two.

What these data reveal more than anything else is the pervasiveness of sexual violence. In the case of these women, and in the case of many other women from around the globe, sexual violence occurred before they fully understood their own sexuality. At whichever point it occurs, it fundamentally warps potentially empowering understandings of one's own sexuality. For both women who directly experience sexual violence and women who are indirectly affected by its existence, this issue is the silent subtext of their learning processes regarding sex.

The topic of sexual violence appeared in nearly every interview I conducted, even though my interview questions never asked directly about sexual violence. In fact, the closest I came to prompting a conversation about violence was in asking how they would rate their lived sexual experiences generally, on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being disempowering and 10 being extremely empowering. More interestingly, their retelling of experiences related to violence did not all come about as a result of this particular question. This fact alludes to the ways in which this violence is woven into the very fabric of people's young lives in Mississippi.

The first major theme in these trauma-adjacent conversations is the dissonance between formal sex education and what actually occurs in the lives of these young people. This ties back to the point made by Interviewee 12 on the connections drawn between female fragility and bodily invasion. The juxtaposition of this discourse on “invasion” with experiences of such “invasion” signals a layered set of challenges. In this sense, the language promoted within formal sex education intensifies the effect of sexual violence on how women conceptualize their own bodily autonomy. The language that this interviewee alluded to assumes both that sexual violence is prevalent and that all girls will at some point experience it in some form or another. She goes on to say: “When you have no sex ed, no conversations about sex, no like visible – like I didn’t see any healthy relationships about sexuality as a child, and then you pile like trauma on, how then do you empower yourself as an adult?” (12, pg. 5). She is deliberate in noting the trauma that the majority of women in Mississippi must tack on. Trauma weighs down even its witnesses, and once we dig into those effects, the dissonant undercurrent created by sexual violence becomes ever more apparent.

For a couple of my interviewees, their very first introductions to sex and sexuality were through violent iterations of such. These iterations ranged from night terrors fueled by the fear of bodily “invasion” to literally having one’s first sexual experience be one of familial sexual predation. The amount of people in my relatively small sample who identified their first sexual experience as nonconsensual was telling of the complexity that exists in this particular realm. While answering my final question that asked respondents to broadly describe the ways their conceptions of sexuality and bodily autonomy have evolved over the course of their lifetime, Interviewee 2 brought forth where her journey nominally began: “I was in this situation in high school where I was, like, groped inappropriately by a really good friend. ... It was the first time anything had ever happened so I was completely unaware that I was supposed to be uncomfortable. Like I thought, ‘this is what it is!’” (2, pg. 1). This genuine misunderstanding also popped up very specifically in my conversation with

Interviewee 5, which she prefaced by saying that it was “gonna get a little dark.” She went on to tell me that “right around Katrina, 2005 ... I was sexually assaulted and that’s when I like knew what it was. Well, I didn’t really understand, but that was my first encounter with it. And looking back I was like, I knew ... what it was” (5, pg. 2). She, like many of my other respondents, was between the ages of 20 and 23 at the time of our interview, meaning she could not have been more than 7 or 8 years old during the incident she describes. She also finds it necessary to note the fact that she somehow knew what was happening to her. These experiences remind us that a deeper sort of bodily knowledge gets implanted at a much younger age than anyone might like to admit. In both of these examples, we also see evidence that violence is embedded in the teaching of sexuality itself. Violence is assumed rather than surprising. There are rarely, if ever, explicit acknowledgments of such violence in the lives of these women, and there is a great deal of gatekeeping around the appropriate age to begin any kind of acknowledgment.

The debate over which ages should be allowed to engage in discourse on this topic takes place in multiple arenas, from state government taskforces to local schoolboards to classrooms. But for many, especially people who experience or know others who have experienced sexual violence at any young age, this question of age-appropriateness is moot. For Interviewee 12, the adults at her high school were constantly wrestling with this question. She recalls that “in 11th grade we had a college student come, and they gave a presentation to 11th and 12th grade girls about consent or healthy relationships. It was like – by that point ... I had already experienced an unhealthy relationship in 9th grade. ... The impact of that [presentation] was honestly kind of negative because it was framed like only upperclassmen women are allowed to hear this. It was just like a slap in the face to me of like – so we’re going to keep pretending like everyone doesn’t need to hear this information?” (12, pg. 2). In this retelling, she identifies the dissonance between the debate on age-appropriate sexual education and the lived experiences of young, sometimes incredibly young, girls.

The apparent truth is that the vast majority of women are either victims of sexual violence or friends of victims, and these instances of violence often take place before any kind of institution-based sexuality education is taught.

Perhaps the most salient theme throughout my data is that for these women in this location, fear clouds perceptions of what sexuality could be. In answering my general question about where she first learned about sex, Interviewee 1 told me, “I guess growing up ... my mom was always like – had the talk with me from a very young age. So I knew that ... it was mostly for precaution, like she didn’t want anything to happen to me growing up that she and other people had experienced negatively” (1, pg. 1). Her tone suggested to me that she thought of this as a relatively positive way to first learn about sex. However, I think it’s important that she included how her mom’s openness to talking about sex came from a place of fear that her daughter might experience the violence and disempowerment that colored her own life. Interviewee 7 reflected on her own experience first hearing about sex, and while she didn’t remember exactly where this idea came from, she says, “When I was in elementary school, in my head, sex was a bad word and like a bad thing. ... I did not entirely understand what sex was, but I remember being like this is bad. This is really bad” (7, pg. 2). It again speaks volumes that the first thing many of these women learned about sex was that it signaled fear, overwhelming complexity, and danger. Interviewee 7 also discussed how her fear of sex continued well into her teens, and that: “I was also deeply terrified of rape and that just freaked me the fuck out. I remember genuinely being – like randomly at night being deeply terrified of having sex” (7, pg. 3). One of my respondents who identifies as queer found the narratives within formal sex education to be especially terrifying in their assumptions that men, specifically, are going to be violent towards women, saying she “went from ninth grade being like, obviously very traumatized, but also being like I never wanna have sex, I never wanna do that. To now coming to understand like that is a thing that I want to do. ... Whether it’s the dyke stereotype or the lesbian

porn stereotype, both are very scary things to be thought of as when you're fifteen" (12, pg. 6). The language of fear surfaces once again in this recollection. Her direct tone further provides evidence that the only way out of this particular obstacle is through.

The juxtaposition of sexual violence's undercurrent with the disempowerment embedded within formal sex education in Mississippi creates a kind of obstacle through which no loopholes exist. The only way, as shown by my data, is through acknowledging, processing, and seeking narratives of empowerment.

Strategizing Resistance

With this deeper understanding of the various cultural codes, institutions, and social constructs that shape the lives of women in Mississippi, we can begin an examination of the various strategies these women use to resist. I previously identified institutions like the church and formal school-based sex education as ones that definitively shape how these women feel about sexuality and their own bodies. More inputs were present in my data as well, including parental guidance, conversations with peers, film media, and the Internet.

To first tackle the question of how women in Mississippi resist the power that the church wields in shaping conceptions of sex, we can turn back to the data and examine the individualized responses I found to the church's constructs. In response to the messaging that women should wait until marriage to have sex, my interviewees resisted in a range of ways. Some took the route of rejecting this directive in every sense. One interviewee explicitly states that: "Part of my journey into coming into who I was was shedding the things the church taught" (15, pg. 1). On the other end of the spectrum, I had one interviewee that has "always believed" in the doctrine of "no adultery," which "translates into things like no sex before marriage" (4, pg. 3). This belief, to her, was actually a conscious decision. She has never had any kind of sexual experience in her life and according to her

analysis, this is partly due to a fear that pursuing sexual relationships will lead to a string of heartbreaks. Another part of this decision, though, is the fear that if she altered her convictions, she would fundamentally change who she is (14, pg. 5). In this way, the presence or absence of religion in one's life is something through which Mississippians define their identity.

Even more interestingly, the majority of my interviewees resisted the conceptions of sexuality propagated by institutionalized religion by occupying the grey area between outright acceptance and outright rejection of these directives. In embracing the inevitable complexity of being women living under the intense scrutiny of culturally embedded religiosity, they resist the black and white morality the church attaches to sex. One interviewee said, "I go to church still sometimes, and it always gets awkward in church when they're like how it's a sin to live with a woman, a woman to lay with a woman ... and it's like, you know, I am open to it? And having tried it, my belief is that religion, God, cares about you and your faithfulness to him and not about those things" (5, pg. 2). This interviewee resists moralistic attachments to both sex and queerness by existing in the space between what the church considers morally "good" and "bad." For another interviewee (14), the church was and still is a massively positive component of her life, and though her denomination isn't outwardly accepting of the queer community, she has been able to explore her own queerness. She, too, exists in a grey area of both holding "a strong individual relationship with God and with Christ" and realizing "you don't just die automatically after you ... have sex [before marriage]," nor do you die after coming out as bisexual (14, pg. 1-2). Though the church isn't specifically seeking to empower her exploration of queerness and her own sexuality, she is still able to hold space for the spiritual empowerment she gains from being a person with faith.

To examine the ways that these women resisted the formal school-based sex education they received, we must take more of a bird's-eye view. There were no unified methods of resistance toward this particular institution, nor were there many patterns between my interviewees. What did

stand out to me, however, were the many ways that formal sex education sought to define the boundaries around normalcy, or what constitutes normative sexuality. From here, I began to examine the role that queerness and queer methodology played in my data, and what this methodology could reveal to me about strategies of resistance.

One obvious explanation for the centrality of queerness in my data was that a majority of the women I spoke to identified as queer. Clearly, queerness was bound to take centerstage in some capacity. But another reason I found myself thinking deeply about this concept was that the strategies straight-identifying women in my data set were using to challenge Southern conceptions of sexuality were not dissimilar from those that these queer-identifying women were. The queer women I spoke to were certainly facing added layers of oppression in Mississippi's tightly heteronormative culture and landed far outside conceptions of normative Southern womanhood. However, the straight women I spoke to, who all viewed themselves as sexual beings outside of the institution of marriage, *also* landed outside of normativity. In many ways, my straight-identifying interviewees seemed to be using scripts similar to those available to the queer community in Mississippi who have for many decades sought to challenge the notion that there is any "normative" way to perform sexuality. My data set continues to showcase that none of these ideas can be explored without a focus on localization, and this section will seek to explore the specific ways that queerness is understood, lived, and expressed in the context of Mississippi.

I want to first acknowledge that in no way does my data encompass a remotely full picture of what it means to be queer in Mississippi. The majority of the women I spoke to came from middle class backgrounds, a few from the upper-middle class, a majority are college-educated, and the majority of the queer women in my sample are white. All interviewees in my sample are cisgender as well. This makes for a woefully inadequate lens through which to study the queer experience in

Mississippi. But these long form narratives still allow for an intriguing look into the strategies that women employ for resistance when the concept of normative sexuality is so exceedingly narrow.

Many of my interviewees reflected a reality where sex itself was stigmatized in every sense of the word. Part of this reality tied into the overall inadequacy of school-based sex education and the fact that information on STDs, contraceptives, and even the mechanics of sex had to be found elsewhere. Another part of this reality tied into the ways that the parents of these women treated sex itself, along with queerness, as taboo. The queer women in my sample described the need to go extra lengths to situate their own sexuality into Mississippi's heavily religious, deeply conservative sociopolitical landscape. Even Interviewee 13, who identifies as straight, casually noted that "obviously in Mississippi they think you can't know what 'gay' is" (13, pg. 1). It was unclear in this instance who exactly she believed she was referring to by saying "they," but what was clear was the presence of larger forces controlling how she was and was not allowed to understand sexuality.

For the most part, the queer-identifying women in my sample discovered their queerness through media, the Internet, and peer influence. Interviewee 11, who identifies as bisexual, notes that even though her "first crush was a girl," it wasn't until she spent more time talking to her friends and "moseying around the Internet" that she realized she might not be straight (11, pg. 3). Similarly, Interviewee 12, who identifies as gay, feels as though she "learned more [about sexuality] from random blog pages on the Internet," from "watching *The L Word*," and from "reading *The Princess Diaries* and looking up words because [she] didn't know what they meant" (12, pg. 3). This list of explorative modes reveals a great deal about the many phases of learning these women had to run through in order to understand both sex and sexuality. As a queer woman, [Interviewee 12] was drawn to understanding her budding queerness through media that portrayed queer sexual relationships, like *The L Word*. She also, though, cites *The Princess Diaries*, a book series that centers a straight sexual relationship and makes very explicit references to sexual acts, as a mode that greatly

impacted her understanding of sexuality. To me, this signals the fact that she needed to undergo multiple layers of education to fully understand her own sexuality. In her community, sex itself was largely undiscussed. Queer sex, then, as well as queer romance, lay even more deeply underground. In this re-education, these women strategically sought out narratives that empowered them to explore sexuality and the endless potential of understanding one's body.

The impact of parental guidance, or lack thereof, on conceptions of both sex and queerness also played a huge role in how these women have come to understand their sexuality. Interviewee 7 described how she was incredibly scared of sex as a child: "A lot of that has to do with the anxiety I had as a kid. And the fact that my parents never talked about sex" (7, pg. 3). She also recalls a time in elementary school where her mom caught wind of some kid starting a "sex club," probably in an effort to get to the bottom of what sex actually meant. In her words, "My mom was like oh, your friend, she said she started what kind of club? And I whispered, like – a sex club. And then she was like, 'That's not bad, it just means male and female.' Like she just avoided it" (7, pg. 2). The ways that Interviewee 7's parents tiptoed around her having a sexuality of any kind made her genuinely terrified of seeing herself as a sexual being. The treatment of queerness within the household adds another layer entirely for my interviewees who identify as such. For Interviewee 14, acceptance of her queer identity lies in conflict with her family's discourse. She first realizes that she has only identified her queerness explicitly to another person "maybe one or two times before" and that the main reason for this is as follows: "While I feel like my family is accepting of the idea of equality and people deserve to have equal rights, and people are who they are, it's different when it's around your on dinner table, and it's someone that you like know directly and have cared for" (14, pg. 1-2). Interviewee 14 in part attributed this feeling to the unique politics surrounding queerness within Black communities in Mississippi. She identifies a particular dissonance within her family's politics that accepts queerness writ large but hesitates to feel comfortable with queerness being present in

their own home. In seeing this dissonance, however, she does not opt to outwardly revolt against their lack of understanding. Instead, she holds on to the comfort her family's community provides, and seeks narratives of empowerment and queer community elsewhere.

To understand queerness within the lives of my interviewees, we must simultaneously examine how queerness intersects with race. Frequently, when it comes to personal family politics, queerness is only studied within conservative white families, who generally practice blatant homophobia in all modes, or within liberal white families, who go too far in attempting to prove their overwhelming acceptance of their queer relatives. Especially in a place like Mississippi, where white conservative contexts dominate the outside world's conceptions of what it means to be queer in a politically conservative place, the intersections of queerness and race are consistently overlooked. Again, I do not think my sample can by any means paint a remotely full picture of this intersection, especially because understanding race in Mississippi goes much deeper than the Black-White racial binary. But these data shed light on some of the important differences that exist when queer sexuality and race intersect in the South, and how the intersection adds another layer to the work these women must do to resist.

For my interviewees who identified as both Black and queer, it became apparent that they had always experienced a marked tension between the politics of their families, churches, and peers, as well as tension within each of these groups. As I described, Interviewee 14 noted this tension among her own family members where queerness was tolerable as long as it didn't make it to their own dining table (14, pg. 1-2). Interviewee 5 described the ways this phenomenon traced into her experience with religion as well. She grew up attending a Black church on the coast of Mississippi and said, "I go to church still sometimes, and it always gets awkward ... when they're like how it's a sin to live with a woman, a woman to lay with a woman ... and it's like you know, I am open to it? And having tried it, it's not – my belief is that religion, God, cares about you and your faithfulness to

him, and not about those things” (5, pg. 2). This description came in conjunction with her noting that queerness in her peer circles was more than accepted. Religion in the Black community, according to my data, adds a layer of complexity to the ways queer Black women in Mississippi discover their lives as sexual beings. Interviewee 15 articulated the uniqueness of coming to understand her queer sexuality as an Asian-American woman. She says, “I’ve just really noticed that my Asian friends don’t really talk about sexuality in the same way that honestly my white friends do. I’ve talked to one particular friend about it who’s bi, and she’s like ‘Oh, sometimes I don’t wanna use she/her pronouns.’ But then she’s like I’m not gonna explore that. ... There’s just no way she can explore that in a healthy way without hating herself because that’s just how Asian parents are” (15, pg. 3). What she appears to be pointing to is the lack of social scripts available for Asian women to explore their own potential queerness. Interviewee 15 herself notes that if her family’s politics were any different, and even says that if she were white, she would likely identify as queer. This reality is incredibly heavy and hints at the true role of race in how women in Mississippi are permitted to explore queerness. In acknowledging this reality, we also acknowledge the added layers of re-education and healing these women must enact to be able to discuss what empowering sexuality looks like for them.

As is quite clear from my discoveries and this discussion, the strategies of resistance enacted by these women cannot be disentangled from the intersecting identities they hold. Through embracing moralistic grey areas and seeking empowerment through re-education, these women actively craft new narratives for themselves that challenge the institutions aiming to shape them. There is no unified strategy, no collective action in this particular context, but that does not make these efforts any less effective. That’s why it’s vital to examine strategies of resistance from a localized standpoint as well as an individualized one. Without a localized and individualized

perspective, we cannot gain appreciation for the work these women must do to challenge the institutions that aim to shape them, and we lose sight of what it means to make change.

Conclusion

My data reveal the incredibly narrow framing of sex that institutions in Mississippi present to these women. The two institutions primarily focused on this narrow framing are the church and formal school-based sex education. Outside of these institutions, though, my data also helped me identify a variety of inputs that further shape the ways that these women have come to understand sexuality and bodily autonomy. These included but were not limited to the Internet, parental guidance, peer relationships, movies and TV. Once I unpacked these framings, I could then move to an analysis of the ways in which these women learned, and are still learning, how to resist. There wasn't one formula to follow, nor was there a collective sense of action. Instead, their resistance was personal, strategic, and vital.

This paper functions as a restorative re-centering of the Sociology of Sexuality around rural, marginalized, often forgotten populations. The South, and Mississippi in particular, is uniquely situated in America's sociopolitical landscape to shed light upon what remains unexplored in the field of resistance studies. Studying the strategic resistance of women in Mississippi who seek to see themselves as sexual beings is one place to begin examining why the local context matters. More than anything else, this paper shows that those under the foot of institutional oppression are and will always be locating pathways through which to assert personhood and agency. This looks different for individuals with different intersecting identities and even different personalities, but it occurs one way or another. The specificity of Southern womanhood and the ways it ends up intersecting with sexual expression, queerness, and race serves as a perfect entry point through which to dig deeper into this idea that resistance can be a small but powerful shift of the social script.

My data contain countless examples of resistant acts both tiny and powerful. I gravitate to one such story, referenced in my findings, where an interviewee describes the politics of queerness at her own dinner table. Though her family largely accepts queer-identifying people out in the world, she can sense a different energy directed at the prospect of bringing her own queerness into their space. She has not elected to loudly proclaim her identity or protest their subtle homophobia. Rather, I tracked her resistance as vitally strategic – preserving her own sense of personhood and agency by seeking queer spaces elsewhere, while enjoying what she genuinely loves about her familial community. One can clearly see the nuance and complexity in all of the situations the women I interviewed had to navigate. But that is yet another reason that the methods of resistance they enacted required strategy and individualization.

There are certainly many limitations within my data set. I did all my research within the constraints of a global pandemic and relied solely on the information I could gather from the narratives of individuals within long-form interviews. My data set possessed racial gaps as well, with only thirty percent of my interviewees identifying themselves as women of color. In this project, I continued to learn that Southern womanhood intertwines with race at every turn. In future projects like this one, researchers should hone in on Southern womanhood's intersections with Black identities, Latinx identities, Asian identities, and immigrant identities. Each of these intersections produces a complex web of lived experiences – these lived experiences rightfully deserve our attention. This project did not take that step further, but in my mind, focusing on more of these intersections would be the next logical direction. In future studies on this topic, I would recommend taking the step of collecting aggregate data since these individualized interviews are a deep dive rather than a broad one.

Subversion is a malleable concept. Strategies that marginalized groups use to resist take as many forms as there are locations on Earth, and it follows that we must understand them with this

in mind. In this project, my home state of Mississippi serves as a case study to further the conversation on what constitutes resistance in locations that aren't widely known for pushing radical change. This project also expands the scope of the terms "radical" and "resistance" to rightfully include small but equally powerful acts. It doesn't matter that the resistant acts these women engage in would never be deemed "radical" in a place like New York City. Here, we aren't studying New York City. We're focused on Mississippi, in this case, and using Mississippi as a springboard to understand similar places.

Confirming personhood and agency within a tightly constructed identity, in this case within Southern womanhood, calls for a conscious reimagining of the social scripts made available to you. When sociologists work to understand the intricacies of these social scripts, we simultaneously open a window into the writing of new scripts hidden from the average viewer. What's more, we open a window into making change. Women in Mississippi will not dismantle the structures and institutions that define womanhood in one swift motion, with a large-scale protest, revolt, or revolution. When it comes to how women subvert the heteronormative, patriarchal structures seeking to police their sexuality, understanding the context in which an act of resistance occurs is the only way to see why such subversions have power. We can take cues from the resistance scholars that have come before. Most significantly, we can take direction from the Foucauldian notion that "where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault). It does follow that the existence of resistance signals the existence of robust control. But, what's more salient about this idea is that human beings will, by nature, resist what seeks to control them.

Lastly, I believe it is vitally important that advocacy groups working to help women understand sexuality openly and holistically pay attention to sociological analyses of how these understandings form. They are and will always be location-specific and community-driven. Sociology provides a unique and compelling set of theories through which to study strategies of resistance and

their inevitable localization, and the South exists as an ideal backdrop for this endeavor. When we center the link between individuals and their societal conditions, a window opens into the how, what, and why of the stories people tell. When we take this methodology a step further by grounding this link in place-based identity, the picture becomes even clearer.

Personally, I know that I will always be haunted by the figure of the South and its heavy grasp on my identity. I found community among the women I spoke to in that we will all continue to be haunted. But in the midst of this tight control, we will continue to locate hope, to locate pathways to resist. We will continue to seek catharsis and joy, like Idgie and Ruth in *Fried Green Tomatoes*, like countless Southern women who have come before. Our personhood is inherent, and our individual agency is within reach. As long as scholars continue to devote time and energy to those who do not “wield the bullhorn,” so to speak, our capacity to enact real, radical change is imminent.

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