INTRODUCTION

“In the Eyes of the Lord”

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?
—Audre Lorde, *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*

I live in a small town in Kentucky. Although I have lived in Kentucky for 20 years, 17 of these in lesbian relationships, I had not personally experienced, or, to be more precise—noticed—much homophobia until a spring day in 2003 when a lean man wearing a Christian fish belt buckle and a black T-shirt called homosexuality an “abomination” to me in my own backyard.

Anna, my partner, and I had just moved from Lexington to Thomasville, Kentucky, a town closer to my workplace where houses are inexpensive. I was digging in the garden, pulling out a few random weeds before planting tomato, pepper, and cucumber plants when “Jim” walked up to the fence bordering our yard and that of our 90+-year-old neighbor, Ms. Smith. Jim belonged to the same church parish as Ms. Smith and had come over to till her backyard so she could put in her garden that season. He introduced himself to me and, when he saw me digging in a tough patch, offered to till the area I was weeding. He seemed nice, was very persistent, and figured out that I was an easy sell when it came to an extra pair of hands in the backyard. Jim pushed his tiller through our gate and began working while I weeded nearby.
When he finished and I was offering him a glass of water, he immediately inquired, “Are you married?” I knew this was a precursor to asking me on a date. I have a conventional feminine appearance, which makes most people assume that I am heterosexual.

“No,” I responded, “I’m involved with someone.” Although not legally married, Anna and I traveled to Vermont in 2002 to be officially joined in a civil union. I struggled then with Jim, and still struggle at times, to find the best way to answer questions about my marital status. Heteronormative assumptions and potential homophobia lurk behind this question, depending upon who is doing the asking and why.

Jim inquired, “Do you go to church?”

“No,” I said, and then took my own leap of faith. “We’re gay, and the churches around here aren’t very supportive of it.”

He paused, looked confused, and examined me closely. A long moment passed. He announced, “It’s an abomination in the eyes of the Lord.”

Stunned, I just stood there looking at him. The air grew thick. I felt dazed, afraid, shamed, and weirdly, curious. “Someone just called me an abomination in my own backyard,” I thought, “This isn’t supposed to happen.” I felt like an anthropologist stumbling upon an unexpected and unpleasant finding about my own life.

Jim added, “I’ll pray for you,” then there was a long pause, “that you grow good vegetables.” We chatted briefly about soil quality. Meanwhile, I didn’t recognize myself. I am a very outspoken, some might even say opinionated, person and was surprised by my reticence. I found that I was reluctant to confront him about his homophobic comment. What if he decided to burn a cross on our lawn? Looking at myself from far away, I listened to him pontificate about his relationship to the Lord in the righteous tones of the born again.

The act of speaking with nonbelievers or sinners about the Christian God is a form of testimony called “witnessing.” Witnessing is premised on the fundamentalist doctrine that the faithful are charged to seize every opportunity to introduce God into an unbeliever’s life and let the power of the Lord work on changing his or her heart, and win another soul for God. Although witnessing is commonplace in the Bible Belt, this was the first time I personally experienced it. “The Lord called me,” Jim confided, lowering his voice, as I stood frozen beside him, a hostage in my own backyard. “I believe in the Lord. I’m so close to God, I left my wife and children. She went one way and I went the high way. My relationship with the Lord was more important.”
“Just like the apostles,” I thought but didn’t say so. I made an inquiring sound.

“I just don’t get into all that sleeping around, going from bed to bed,” Jim elaborated.

“But you were married,” I inquired, puzzled.

“My wife wanted to sleep around,” he clarified.

“So she wanted a non-monogamous relationship?” I responded.

He stopped and peered at me puzzled. After a moment he continued, “I believe in the creator,” he added, “not evolution.”

“I believe in a creator too, but I also believe in evolution,” I responded. He blinked at me. “I mean, it’s possible to believe in both, don’t you think? They aren’t irreconcilable. There’s so much scientific evidence to support evolution.”

He shook his head slowly, “I don’t think so,” he said with some doubt.

Our conversation lapsed into a strained silence. I was waiting for him to leave, but he was only halfway through the glass of water.

“I haven’t seen my children in two years. It’s up to God. God will bring them back to me.”

“They must miss you very much,” I said carefully, thinking that this was a safe, nonjudgmental, not-going-to-get-me-called-any-more-names comment.

“You know the story of the prodigal son?” he explained, “The son had to leave, and it was the hardest thing for his father to let him go. But when he came back, the father went out to meet him. That’s what I will do. My door is always open for them to come back to me. I’m leaving it up to the Lord, I’m not going to bother with lawyers and court and all that. God will bring them home.”

While thinking privately that he would be much better off with a good lawyer, I asked, “How old are your children?”

Distracted, he changed his demeanor from preacher to person, Jim answered “12, 14, 17, and 18. But I’ve spoken with the oldest.”

“Gosh, that would be hard for the youngest ones to come to you. The prodigal son was a grown up, wasn’t he?” He looked at me blankly, and almost nodded. “Did your oldest child explain why the others hadn’t come to see you or talk with you?”

“No. We just spoke on the phone. We are still reconciling.”

“Reconciling from what?” I thought to myself.

He continued, “That’s what happens when you disobey the Lord, you get spanked.”
I wondered, “What on earth is he talking about? Something he did to his wife, to his kids? Is he referring to my abominable behavior again?”

He clarified, “I believe in discipline, corporal punishment. If my kids break a rule, I spank them. I mean, I don’t beat them or anything,” he backtracked, “but I believe in discipline. The courts didn’t see it my way.”

“Okay, this guy is really creepy,” I thought. “And he’s in my backyard.” With some follow-up innocuous pleasantries, Jim wheeled his tiller to the gate. He left and I went inside my not-so-safe-feeling home. This encounter with Jim—and his rambling, scary, illogical worldview—was a watershed moment. I suddenly realized that, “Yes, I am in a same-sex relationship while living in the Bible Belt.”

Reflecting upon this interaction with Jim, I recognize that my fears that he was violent, that he might “burn a cross on our lawn” were, if not completely unfounded, at least very unlikely. At the same time, while most conservative Christians would not engage in violence against another person, they do ascribe to a religious ideology that constructs the behavior of an entire group of people as an “abomination.” This influences social attitudes and behaviors, and is the regional context within which I based the research for this book. I argue that Bible Belt Christian attitudes create and maintain a homophobic status quo. Conventions of small-town life, rules that govern southern manners, and the power wielded by Christian institutions and Christians within secular institutions all serve as a foundation for both passive and active homophobia.

People in the Bible Belt, like Jim, regularly query acquaintances, “What church do you belong to?” The answer to this question conveys a wealth of information, not only about the particular Christian denomination (i.e., Old Regular vs. Free Will Baptist) but also signifies a set of potential political and social attitudes as well as class status. Bible Belt Christians practice what I call “compulsory Christianity,” communicative exchanges that involve presenting one’s Christian identity to others in routine social interactions. Not only is this an easily observable social norm, but religious leaders explicitly tell parishioners to spread Christ’s message. For example, while attending local churches for this study, I heard preachers and other religious authority figures directly instruct parishioners to share the word of God outside the church walls: “Teachers, see your classroom as a vessel of God and your students as an opportunity to spread God’s word.” Church members were specifically instructed to perceive their workplaces, schools, day-care centers, doctor’s offices, and libraries as battleground spaces in which Christians might find opportunities to spread the message of salvation.

Because most Christian churches in the Bible Belt (including Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, and nondenominational
megachurches) construct homosexuality as sinful, lesbians and gay men from the region must choose between staying in what I call the “toxic closet” or risk rejection and ostracism from the people who are supposed to care for them the most—their families, friends, and neighbors. The lesbians and gay men I interviewed also heard from family members, teachers, peers, neighbors, and preachers that these gay feelings—that they could not stop with any force of will—damned them to hell. No matter how hard they tried, and close to 60 percent of the Bible Belt gays I interviewed tried really hard, some weeping at the altar in front of their congregations week after week, they still could not pray the gay away. Donald, who is 52, white, from Indiana originally and currently a long-term resident of Louisville, Kentucky, summed it up this way: “In other words, we say to God, ‘If I’m going to hell because of this, then take it away from me.’ There isn’t a gay person that hasn’t asked that at one point in time in one way or other.”

Many feared their uncontrollable attractions doomed them to hell. For example, Linda, who is white, 29, and from Texas, whose father was a preacher with the Disciples of Christ, prayed many times for her salvation:

I would go outside to smoke, and I remember that I would often stand outside while I was smoking and just weep silently, I’d just weep and weep, and I’d ask God, “I don’t understand, how can you say that you love me, that you love me so much that you sent your son, your perfect son to suffer and die for me so that I wouldn’t have to go to hell just because of being a sinner, how can you say you love me and yet for one thing that I cannot control, that I cannot stop, God knows I’ve tried, but you would send me to burn in hell forever separated from you, forever.”

Central to this book are interviews with Bible Belt gays like Donald and Linda, a group of people simultaneously on the front line of our national culture war over “family values” and ones rarely cast as leading characters in stories about American culture.

Some of the Bible Belt gays in Pray the Gay Away include people rejected by their families, like Joshua, for coming out, and some who do not come out to their families for fear of rejection, like Ron. Joshua, who is 29, white, and from a suburb outside of Atlanta, grew up in a Southern Baptist home and attended private Christian schools for most of his childhood and adolescence. His parents disowned him when he refused to get treatment for his same-sex attractions. Joshua explained that sharing stories like his was especially important because “this isn’t just some sort of abstract political talking point or political agenda on either side of the debate. At the end of the
day this impacts individuals: your son, your daughter, your neighbor, your teacher, your friend.” He continued:

As juniors in high school we would go to abortion rallies as field trips with our class and we would march around with Stop Abortion Now posters. The dots were connected for us—political action and Christianity. We understood why these needed to be partners. I think that’s why it’s important here in the United States, particularly here in the South, because we live in the Bible Belt, Flannery O’Connor called it the Christ-haunted South. We live in a part of the country where these ideologies, fundamentalist ideology, have so much currency.

Ron, a 36-year-old white man from Eastern Kentucky, generously shared his story with me in my university office one cold February afternoon. Ron never told his parents that he is gay. When Ron began to feel same-sex attractions at age eleven, he did not have anyone to discuss these feelings with; he related, “I feared that if it would be discovered, I almost felt like I may be in danger, physical danger, if I told it.” Ron explained that he worried that if his parents learned he was homosexual they might “harm me, get rough with me, kick me out, withhold their love.”

As I interviewed and discussed my research with dozens of Bible Belt gays, I learned that Josh’s story and Ron’s fears were relatively commonplace. Home is not a haven for many Bible Belt gays; in fact, home may be more dangerous than the streets. A 2006 National Gay and Lesbian Task Force study found that of homeless teens, 20–40 percent identify as gay. If one considers that the most generous estimates of the percentage of gay people in the general population is 10 percent, such a statistic illustrates an alarming overrepresentation of gay youth among the homeless. When I pressed Ron further to explore if now, at the age of thirty-six, he thought his parents would really have beaten, killed, or ostracized him, he said, “No, but I do think that I would have been taken to counseling, maybe even prayed over. The terminology is referred to as ‘laying hands upon.’” “Laying on of hands”—a touch that cures or enlightens—is a spiritual practice in many religious traditions. Within Christianity, laying on of hands can be either a symbolic or a literal invocation of the Holy Spirit into another. It can also border on violence, as was the case with Chris who is white, forty-two, and from Eastern Kentucky.

When Chris came out to her family at the age of 27, her father (a state trooper) and mother put their arms around her in a suffocating embrace and ordered the devil to leave Chris and enter her father. Chris explained what happened:
They were both there and they came up to me and they hugged me and they put their arms around me, a grip so tight you couldn't get out of it, literally saying that the devil needs to come out of me and into my father. They literally thought that an evil spirit had come into my life and had taken me over and that the only way that they could help me is to take it from me and put it on themselves. You know, here they were fifty, late fifties. And they had lived their lives. They felt like they were making the decision that whatever had come upon me, had taken control of my life, to come into them, so that I would have an okay start.

Frightened, Chris struggled to free herself. With both parents blocking the front door, Chris ran to the basement exit, her father chasing her down the stairs. She managed to escape. Later she learned her parents thought if only they could have kept Chris at home (she speculated that they planned to handcuff her in the basement) until their family preacher came to pray the “devil of homosexuality” out of her, she might have been cured. As psychologically traumatic as this experience was, and as Chris herself called it, “the most harrowing experience I have ever gone through,” she still interpreted this event as evidence that her parents loved and cared for her. They had made a calculated decision that Chris's father as head of the household was best equipped to handle the devil, and both acted to spare Chris this suffering.

Most remarkable to me as I digested the implications of her story, Chris's partner, Deanna, who had been listening in, sadly added, “At least Chris's parents fought for her. My parents didn't even care enough to try.” Completely rejected by her southern Ohio Roman Catholic family for being a lesbian, Deanna perceived Chris's familial relationships as far superior to her own. Over time Chris's parents grew to accept that Chris and Deanna were “best friends,” and the couple is welcome in their home. After 16 years, Deanna's parents still refuse contact with her.

Like Ron, Chris, and Deanna, the Bible Belt gays interviewed for this book divulged many painful stories of rejection and abuse from the people closest to them. Patty, who is white, 40, and from Eastern Kentucky, explained that she was not invited to swim in her aunt's pool as a young “butch” girl, but her cousin and brother were. Imagine a hot summer day, the tantalizing blue gleam of the pool, the sounds of other children, even your own siblings, splashing and laughing, and you aren't allowed to swim because there is something about you the adults think is diseased and polluting. This example conjures up images of the kind of Jim Crow segregation in the South that African Americans endured before the civil rights movement.
There are indeed parallels between the oppression that people of color have experienced and continue to experience in the United States, and the ways homophobia plays out in gay people’s lives. But there are differences too. One is that people of color are rarely rejected by their own families because they are a member of a minority racial group. In the following chapters, I explore how widespread, institutionally sanctioned practices of exclusion, rejection, and abuse affect gay children, adolescents, and adults within their own families and communities in the Bible Belt.

Getting a Clue

Shaken by my encounter with Jim, I shared what I called “the abomination incident” with my friends and family, and received confusing responses. The most common reaction my gay friends from Kentucky had was a polite, knowing air of “Duh, where have you been all this time?” This response puzzled me. It lacked what I felt was an appropriate level of outrage on my behalf. I began to understand that although it was horrifying to me to have religiously based insults said to my face, this kind of behavior was not new or particularly shocking to them. Indeed, one of the significant findings from this study is that growing up in the Bible Belt regionally shapes an individual’s expectations of Christians and Christianity. In contrast, my family members who live in Massachusetts and California, and my gay friends in urban coastal areas overreacted. They lambasted southerners as backward hicks and urged us to move immediately. Gay friends from New York City shuddered in horror upon hearing about the abomination incident, and declared they could not visit such a scary place as Thomasville, Kentucky, for fear they would be attacked just for walking down our street.

None of these responses satisfied me. But they did burst my bubble of progressive political feminist self-absorption. I couldn’t just up and move—faculty jobs are not easy to get. Also, I liked most of the Kentuckians I met and knew. They are funny, down-to-earth, and smart, and definitely not a redneck stereotype. I did not want to erect a 12-foot privacy fence to keep out devout gardening neighbors. Still, I do not think religious hate speech is something anyone should get used to. If I hadn’t paid much attention to homophobia until it walked into my backyard and offended and frightened me, this incident in 2003, coupled with the daily homophobic headlines during the 2004 political season, motivated me to interview gay people raised in Christian homes to explore the insights they have to share about their lives in the Bible Belt.
Geography Matters

What is the Bible Belt? The phrase “Bible Belt” was first coined by the journalist H. L. Mencken around the time of the famous “Monkey Trial,” also known as the Scopes Trial, a legal case that tested the state’s stake in the teaching of Darwin’s theory of evolution in public school science classes in 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee. The Bible Belt is a diverse region that consists of large cities, small towns, and rural areas. A variety of racial and ethnic groups populate the region as well as a range of religious denominations. For instance, a visitor finds Roman Catholic churches and Jewish synagogues in Kentucky. The percentage of people who identify as Catholic in Kentucky is 15%; the percentage of people who identify as Jewish in Kentucky is .3%. At the same time, protestant Christianity overshadows other forms of religious expression in the region.

The geographic area of the Bible Belt overlaps with the census regions of the United States: West South Central (Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana), East South Central (Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama), and South Atlantic (West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida). After doing a cross-tabulated analysis between census region and the 2006, 2008, and 2010 General Social Survey (GSS) question that taps religious orientation with the question, “Do you consider yourself a fundamentalist, moderate, or liberal?” data illustrates that a much larger percentage of respondents who live in the Bible Belt self-identify as fundamentalist.

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<th>Region of the US</th>
<th>% of individuals who self-identify as fundamentalists</th>
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<td>2006</td>
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<td>East South Central*</td>
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*Bible Belt regions*
While the term “fundamentalist” coupled with “liberal” and “moderate” is a weak measure, both because it collapses political and religious orientations and because it is overly broad, GSS data demonstrates that 20–40% of respondents from Bible Belt states compared to other census regions chose “fundamentalist” as their identity. This suggests a high level of conservative religiosity in the region. Further, although it is problematic to make sociological claims about a region as broad and diverse as the Bible Belt, especially given that the majority of the people I interviewed are mostly from two states in the region—Kentucky and Texas—I believe the communicative frame of the Bible Belt offers both lay readers and scholars more than it takes away. The linguist George Lakoff describes frames as “mental structures that shape the way we see the world.” The Bible Belt frame swiftly and succinctly references both region and a hegemonic religious ideology, which produce wide-ranging observable consequences in the area. At the same time, this region is not homogenous, encompassing as it does population differences as vast as the urban centers of Houston, Texas, and Atlanta, Georgia, small towns like Thomasville with a population of 16,500 people, and rural areas so remote one might travel a two-lane road for 30 miles before reaching a dirt road into a “hollow” in which three generations of a family live.

U.S. Christian Fundamentalism: A Brief History

The terms “fundamentalist,” “evangelical,” “religious Right,” and “Christian Right” all describe Christians and forms of Christianity sometimes used in confusing, poorly defined, and overlapping ways. It is a fact worth repeating that not all Christians, nor all Christian denominations, denounce homosexuality. Certain denominations, the Episcopal Church for example, have made great strides in recognizing gay people as equal to heterosexuals: all as God’s children. Even among evangelical Christians, there is a diversity of perspectives on homosexuality. The word “evangelical” comes from the Greek word meaning gospel or good news. Essential evangelical beliefs include (1) recognizing the authority of the Bible; (2) salvation through being born again in Christ, and (3) spreading the word of Christ. Importantly, self-identified evangelicals may be politically conservative or liberal, although the majority of evangelicals tend toward the political Right, with only a significant minority on the Left. For instance, Randall Balmer’s Thy Kingdom Come, an Evangelical’s Lament opens with the following, “I write as a jilted lover. The evangelical faith that nurtured me as a child and sustains me as an adult has been hijacked by right-wing zealots who have distorted the gospel of Jesus Christ,
defaulted on the noble legacy of nineteenth-century evangelical activism, and failed to appreciate the genius of the first amendment.” Consequently, while most fundamentalists consider themselves evangelicals, not all evangelicals identify as fundamentalist. Jerry Falwell famously described a fundamentalist as “just an evangelical who is mad about something.”

Additionally, in the scholarly literature on religion, there are key differences among conservative Protestant denominations which preach biblical inerrancy. For example, while Baptists and Pentecostals both advocate a literal interpretation of scripture, and both denounce homosexuality as sinful, Baptists believe that all of God’s mysteries may be found in the Bible. In her book *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* Nancy Tatom Ammerman, a sociology of religion scholar, notes that the fundamentalist belief system begins with the understanding that “There are simply no truths for human beings to discover that are not already revealed in the Bible.” In contrast, Pentecostal denominations are charismatic. This means that members believe there are still divine prophecies that the devout may uncover. During Pentecostal services parishioners may be filled with the spirit, perform healings, and speak in tongues. Brother Damien, who is 44, Native American, from Central Kentucky, and a religious brother in the Orthodox Church of America, grew up in a Pentecostal church and described it during our interview:

My mother was Pentecostal. The closest religion to Pentecostal Christianity is Voodoo. Voodoo and Pentecostal are very similar in that the core tenants, of, for instance, Voodoo are possession by the lower spirit, and in Pentecostalism it’s the same thing. The core of the religion is possession. They believe in two types of possession: the demonic possession and the holy possession of the Holy Spirit. And everything centers around that. Pentecostals are obsessed with demonic possession. I grew up in that. I kid people, it’s like growing up in the *Exorcist*, because people are constantly talking about demonic possession and holy possession and they’re speaking in tongues. If you go to a Pentecostal service, people will be possessed by the Holy Spirit and they’ll start speaking in tongues, they dance around, they gyrate their bodies because they’re being possessed.

The term “fundamentalist” thus most accurately describes a small group of conservative Protestant denominations such as Baptists.

Fundamentalism emerged as a militant wing of Christian evangelicalism, accruing power and cultural influence through crusades, missions, and revivals, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,
waxing in popularity until the mid-1920s and the Scopes Trial on the teaching of evolution in public schools. Although William Jennings Bryan, the prosecuting attorney for the Scopes Trial, won his case against biology teacher John Scopes, the decision was later overturned on a technicality and the media coverage of the trial, particularly journalist H. L. Mencken’s satirical stories about the “backward hill-billies” who accept “degraded nonsense which country preachers are ramming and hammering into yokel skulls,” cast fundamentalists and fundamentalism as outdated, restrictive, and anti-modern. After this public ridicule, fundamentalism became “not so much somnolent as invisible to the larger society until the mid 1970s” retreating into its “own subculture of congregations, denominations, Bible camps, Bible institutions, colleges, seminaries, missionary societies, and publishing houses.”

Fundamentalists reentered public life with the neo-evangelicals of the 1940s and ’50s, most notably Billy Graham, Carl Henry, and the beginnings of Christianity Today, a publication billed as a “magazine of evangelical conviction.” In the 1970s, Jerry Falwell, who was originally opposed to political activism, became convinced that America was losing its moral center; he joined with other conservative Christian leaders such as D. James Kennedy, Charles Stanley, Timothy La Haye, and Paul Weyrich to form the Moral Majority—“a nonpartisan political organization to promote morality in public life and to combat legislation that favored the legalization of immorality.” In the presidential election of 1976, the Moral Majority cast their support for Jimmy Carter, a staunch Southern Baptist, but they quickly became disenchanted with Carter’s leftist evangelicalism and progressive policies, and backed Ronald Reagan in 1980. The Moral Majority operated for approximately 10 years, dissolving with the ascendency of other Christian political organizations including the Christian Coalition and James Dobson’s Focus on the Family. Reaching a wide audience through radio, television, and mass mailings, Christian Right groups rally financial and social capital using the politics of fear against an imagined threat or enemy. In the 1970s and ’80s, the dual threats most often cited to mobilize funding were those of communism and abortion. With the collapse of the Berlin wall in 1989, a communist takeover ceased to be perceived as a real threat, and Christian fundamentalist leaders replaced the “Red scare” with opposition to homosexuality. Abortion remains a key conservative Christian issue. Throughout the 1990s and during the eight years of the staunchly pro-choice Clinton administration, conservative Christian organizations continued to gather financial steam and broadcast their religious and political agendas. They largely remained out of the national media spotlight until 2000 while advancing a number
of anti-gay ballot initiatives in individual states including Oregon, Colorado, Maine, and Idaho.\footnote{27}

Conservative Christians had a strong advocate in George W. Bush, the 43rd president of the United States and a born-again Christian. During Bush’s presidency from January 20, 2001, through January 19, 2009, faith-based programs and policies were well funded, and homosexuality, particularly fears about same-sex marriage, emerged as a wedge issue for politicians on both sides of the aisle. The 2004 presidential election season was an exceptionally difficult period for lesbians and gay men in many states as Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Utah all included and passed anti-gay marriage ballot initiatives that year. With the anti-gay marriage amendment on our Kentucky ballot, the homophobic rhetoric in newspapers, television broadcasts, political advertisements, and mailings arriving at our home ramped up. Lurid language and ominous music warned that “family values” were under attack by gay activists determined to destroy marriage as a social institution. Gay marriage was compared to marrying a dog, horse, cousin, or child. Lesbians and gay men were constructed as perverse, polluting people, and homosexuality literally something one could catch by contact with gay people.\footnote{28}

**Bible Belt Christianity**

Conservative Christian, conservative Protestant, fundamentalist, evangelical: none of these designations perfectly captures the climate that Bible Belt gays described in recorded interviews. While there may be great variation in church norms throughout the Bible Belt—some forbid dancing, some expect women to sit in the back pews, wear skirts, and never cut their hair, some sport live bands, some expect member to walk door to door saving souls for Christ—most Christian denominations in the Bible Belt, from Baptist to Methodist to Holiness to Catholic to Jehovah’s Witness to Mormon to nondenominational, are uniform in their construction of homosexuality as sinful. And it is this condemnation of homosexual behavior that is most salient for Bible Belt gays. Because the vast majority of places one might worship in the Bible Belt are homophobic, close to 100% of interview subjects logged significant time learning that same-sex attractions are bad, sinful, and disgusting. Thus, from the perspective of lesbians and gay men from the region, the term that best conveys the rampant and widespread presence of homophobia within Christian institutions is “Bible Belt Christianity.”
Further, Bible Belt Christianity is not confined to religious institutions and Sunday worship. This particular brand of Christianity permeates the multiple environments in which residents work, socialize, and worship. Christian crosses, messages, paraphernalia, music, news, and attitudes saturate everyday settings. Bible Belt Christianity thus influences a wide range of local secular institutions like schools and workplaces, and Bible Belt Christians exert a powerful influence on city, county, and state political and cultural institutions. For Bible Belt gays then, institutional authority figures openly opposed to homosexuality enforcing homophobic institutional policies and practices affect how families and communities perceive and treat gay people, as well as how comfortable an individual feels being openly gay-identified. The historian John Howard explored this phenomenon in his anthology *Carryin’ on in the Gay and Lesbian South*, examining how “a cultural configuration unique to the Bible Belt South” of police, political leaders, media, and churches target homosexuals. This configuration creates a hostile climate for homosexuals in the Bible Belt.

This is especially so in rural areas with small populations in which people know one another and one’s family histories spanning generations. In these areas, regardless of any individual’s actual church attendance, most people self-identify as “Christian” (meaning conservative Protestant), defer to the assumed righteousness of any “Christian” institution, and are suspicious of and deem inferior anyone who is not Christian. As Patty wryly noted, “The only thing worse than being gay in the Bible Belt is being an atheist.” Tara, a 48-year-old white lesbian from Oklahoma, experienced this firsthand at her public high school in suburban Oklahoma City. Although she should have been valedictorian of her class, her Southern Baptist school principal skipped over her to the next candidate who was also Southern Baptist, and Tara received no honors. She believes this is because she lacked any church affiliation and had been raised as an agnostic.

The Study

This book is a “bricolage,” a work creatively constructed from a patchwork of tools at hand, in this case, of qualitative methodologies, to best illuminate the lives and experiences of lesbians and gay men living in the Bible Belt. These methodologies include ethnographic fieldwork, content analysis of media texts, both written and visual, participant observation, autoethnography, and in-depth interviews with Bible Belt gays. In ethnographic fieldwork, a classic anthropological method, the researcher immerses herself in the environment of her subjects to observe firsthand their physical geography, climate,
Introduction

culture, and habitat. Such immersion enables a researcher to produce “thick description” of the research setting and subjects, and thus identify, explore, and interpret the often messy and multilayered phenomenon of human interaction. From the local tire store advertising “Wheels and Bibles” on its front sign, to a radio advertisement for an area church in which the pastor explains “that God will give you not just one chance to redeem your life but many more at the Trinity Baptist Church,” to the musical bands who perform at megachurch services, *Pray the Gay Away* engages in thick description of the Christian-dominated environments of Bible Belt gays.

The social worlds within which I observed manifestations of Bible Belt Christianity included environments as diverse as grocery stores, neighborhood homes and shops, parties, public events, doctor’s offices, gyms, small businesses, churches, and my workplace. In 2006, the official starting point for this study, I began taking note of every expression of Christianity I came across, from bumper stickers, i.e., “ICROSS + 3NAILS = 4GVN” and “Jesus ’08” to pamphlets, music, newspaper columns, yard signs, billboards, charity cups, and references to Christianity in daily conversations. I collected pamphlets and church announcements sent to our home. I jotted down bumper stickers. I counted churches. I noted references to Jesus in casual conversations. I listened to Christian programming. I went to church. In this way, expressions of Christianity—like the velvet painting of Jesus in boxing gloves for sale in a Christian store—intensely sprang into life. Christianity was literally everywhere I looked.

At social events, I chatted about religion with acquaintances over cocktails. I found that most people have strong ideas about religion and sexuality, and most eagerly seized on the opportunity to share theirs with a respectful listener. In my observation, although Christianity plays a starring role in the Bible Belt, most people lack the language and opportunity to discuss their religious experiences and ideas within a critical, analytical framework. Offer such a framework, as is the case when I interview someone, or give a public lecture on being gay in the Bible Belt, or even gently query a colleague about their religious upbringing during party small talk, I found most people eager and grateful for the opportunity to talk openly about religion and homosexuality.

Because Bible Belt Christianity was originally so foreign to me that I feared I was not fully understanding the experiences of Bible Belt gays, I continued, and continue, to informally question the people I come into contact with about their thoughts on religion, as well as pose such questions during formal interviews. While I might argue that I share an insider status with Bible Belt gays because I am a lesbian who has lived in the
Bible Belt for the past 20 years, both my religious background and the fact that I did not move to Kentucky until I was 25 make me an outsider to Bible Belt Christian cultural norms. I grew up Roman Catholic in a politically progressive family. My parents, especially my mother, taught me to believe that discrimination was morally wrong and that acting with prejudice toward a member of any minority group, including homosexuals, was unacceptable. My childhood and adolescent experiences of religion were benign: Liberation Theology Catholicism, sprinkled with an education in Buddhistlike Eastern spirituality, compliments of my father. Northeastern Catholicism, as I experienced it during the late 1970’s and ‘80’s, was also in a warm and fuzzy phase. Post-Vatican II, influenced by the social movements of the 1960s and ‘70s, the priests, nuns, and other religious teachers I interacted with tended to be pleasant, affirming, and socially progressive. Further, there was almost no discussion of hell in churches or my home. I have a distinct memory of being a small child and saying to my mother, “Hell is scary. I don’t understand it.” Her response was, “Oh honey, you don’t need to worry about hell. We Catholics have purgatory. Hell is only for really bad people like Hitler.”

Roman Catholics make up a larger percentage of the population in the Northeast than in other regions. The American Religious Identification Survey notes that 39% of Massachusetts residents identified as Catholic in 2008, down from 54% in 1990. I left Massachusetts to go to Ohio for my undergraduate education in 1988. Thus, my personal religious upbringing was as a Catholic in a Catholic area: I was a member of the religious majority. I believe this early religious privilege made it especially difficult for me to see Bible Belt Christianity, and unconsciously influenced me to assume that my religious experience was common. For example, Roman Catholic dogma contains many challenging constraints on sexuality and reproduction. Birth control, premarital sex, same-sex activity, even masturbation is still sinful within Catholic doctrine. As a child though, I watched as all the Catholics around me, including my family, regularly attended Mass and simply ignored the elements of Catholic doctrine unworkable in their lives. I observed divorced people receive Communion, knew of adolescents and adults having sex outside of marriage, and assumed most women were using birth control since family sizes were small. I knew no one who went to weekly confession. These transgressions were largely ignored by religious, educational, and familial authorities. When I queried adults about this discrepancy between dogma and behavior, I was told some version of the following: “the institution had not yet caught up with people’s real lived experiences, but it will eventually, so you don’t need to worry about it.”
Most conservative Protestant denominations advocate many of the same restrictions on sexuality and reproduction as Catholicism, and like northeastern Catholics in the 1980s, most twenty-first-century parishioners do not adhere to them. What is different though, and what I believe my early privilege as a religious majority member blinded me to, is that many Bible Belt Christians actively try to conform to the narrow dictates of their churches, and most don’t just ignore the elements that inhibit daily functioning as I had observed the Catholics do. At first, I did not believe that any individual would genuinely try to live by what I perceived to be unlivable guidelines (i.e., a literal interpretation of the Bible that prohibits homosexuality), especially when they experienced negative consequences for doing so. Further, as shortsighted as it sounds, I did not think that people really believed they would go to hell for, what was to me, socially constructed “sins.” I perceived Bible Belt Christianity through the lens of my northeastern Catholic experience.

While I was coming out and for years after, it was difficult for me to imagine that anyone could, in real life, think less of another because of the sex of one’s partner. As an intellectual exercise, like the inevitability of death, I knew such oppression existed, but I could not imagine someone actually doing something intentionally homophobic to me, or anyone else for that matter. It was, quite simply, ridiculous, and not something it occurred to me to worry about. I felt confident that we (Americans) had collectively evolved beyond such irrational prejudice and that I was riding the crest of the next wave of progressive social change. In short, I traveled inside overlapping bubbles of religious, educational, regional, and femme privilege, and like most of us with privilege, the bubbles were invisible to me until they popped.

Bible Belt Gays

For the lesbians and gay men I interviewed who grew up in the Bible Belt, the “irrational prejudice” I perceived was the daily terrain they negotiated. I conducted audiotaped interviews with 59 lesbians and gay men ranging in age from 18 to 74. I found interview participants through a mix of personal contacts, convenience, and snowball sampling, attending a board meeting of the Kentucky Fairness Alliance, a statewide gay rights organization, and an Integrity meeting, an Episcopal gay organization. I also spent a week at Texas A&M in College Station, Texas, as a visiting guest researcher for Coming-out Week in October 2008 and interviewed 7 of my informants there. In total, I have interviewed 36 lesbians and 23 gay men. These include seven Black people, three Native Americans, four Hispanics, two Jewish Americans, and the
remainder Caucasians. The 59 participants include 11 couples whom I interviewed together, and one other small group of friends I interviewed at the same time, at their request. In other words, I interviewed 22 people in groups of two, and one group of three friends together. The remaining 34 people I interviewed individually. In addition to these formal interviews, because I participate in several gay rights groups, have gay friends and acquaintances, and give public lectures on being gay in the Bible Belt, I have had informal conversations with hundreds of Bible Belt gays, their straight supporters, and some heterosexual Bible Belt Christians about the issues explored in Pray the Gay Away.

The 59 people who compose my sample are oversampled in three ways. First, because much of my recruitment occurred through gay right’s groups, activists may be overrepresented. Second, because I work in Eastern Kentucky, live near Eastern Kentucky, and my partner is from Eastern Kentucky, I both found and attracted a large number of gay people from rural Kentucky, and rural Eastern Kentucky in particular. I classified 31 subjects, or 53%, of my sample as rural. The degree to which one is “rural” versus “suburban” or “urban” is difficult to measure precisely. This is because people move. To use my partner Anna as an example, she grew up in a small, isolated town in Eastern Kentucky, moved to Lexington (with a population of approximately one-half million people) in her early 20s, and then in her early 30s moved to Thomasville, another small town. Though she lived several years in Lexington, Kentucky, her roots are rural and much of her family still lives in the country. Anna tends to perceive social life through a rural lens and, for these reasons I would classify her as a “rural informant.” Although I do not have access to the same level of biographic detail about all my interview subjects as I do my partner, I used similar criteria to classify the participants in Pray the Gay Away. This meant, in some cases, that an individual interview subject might be classified as both rural and urban since he or she spent significant periods of time living in both geographic environments.

Third, I purposely sought out people from strong religious backgrounds and classified the religiosity of participants. I determined religiosity by the interest individual subjects expressed in religious ideas, their overall knowledge about religious phenomenon, the degree of their engagement with religious institutions both in the past and present, and their current spiritual/religious identities and practices. Thirty-one, or 53%, of my sample exhibited high religiosity and another 10, or 17%, medium religiosity. Denominationally, 41 of the Bible Belt gays I interviewed, or 69%, grew up in a conservative Protestant church. Of these 41, 19 people, or 32% of the total sample, identified their religion of origin as Baptist or Southern Baptist; 13, or 22%, grew
up Roman Catholic; 9, or 15%, of interview subjects worshipped in Pentecostal/charismatic churches at some period during their lives. Two were Jewish, one was raised Unitarian, and only two people I interviewed had little to no religious background or interest. Because people change churches, many of those I interviewed had been members not only of more than one church but had also tried out different Christian denominations. For example, Sarah who is white, 43, and from Eastern Kentucky, had been highly involved in both Baptist and Pentecostal churches. Summing up, more than two-thirds of the Bible Belt gays I interviewed were well versed in Christianity and expressed that their faith, or their spiritual selves, were important to them.

The Undifferentiated Homosexual

It is common for scholars and activists working on gay issues to use the moniker LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered), and more recently, LGBT-TQQA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, two-spirited, queer, questioning, and ally) to refer to a gay and gay-affirming population. Although LGBT-TQQA advocates an admirable public commitment to inclusion and recognition of diversity, I deliberately do not invoke this alphabet-string phrase for the following reasons. *Pray the Gay Away* explores what it means to be gay in the context of multiple and overlapping hegemonic Christian environments, which are largely hostile to homosexuals, and what I call the Bible Belt. I found that an undifferentiated status of “homosexual,” regardless of sex, much less whether one is bisexual or questioning, best frames the experience of Bible Belt gays. For example, most of the people I interviewed attended conservative Christian churches—i.e., Baptist, Pentecostal, and Church of Christ—and grew up in families in which homosexuality was frequently denounced. Consequently, participants’ identity struggles more often took place under the shadow of a preacher’s voice thundering floridly about “homosexuals,” and parents proclaiming that “any child of mine that is gay is dead to me” at the dinner table than in an LGBT center.

Thus, the arguments that I make in *Pray the Gay Away* emerge from Bible Belt gays lived experiences of being stigmatized by those around them. To illustrate, in terms of the oppression we endure, how Bible Belt gays identify is less significant than how we are perceived by others. The early twentieth-century sociologist Charles Horton Cooley theorized this in his interactional theory: the “looking-glass self.” Cooley imagined the social world to be a mirror, reflecting back to us others’ perceptions and judgments, which, in turn, shape the way we see ourselves. In the conservative Christian looking-glass, it matters little how an individual identifies. Consider, for example,
the case of a bisexual woman in a committed heterosexual relationship. Her bisexual identity is both invisible, unless she shares it, and irrelevant, often even if she does share it. Similarly, if she is in a committed lesbian relationship, her bisexual identity is again invisible and irrelevant. She is engaging in a homosexual lifestyle, which most Bible Belt Christians condemn as sinful.

More Than Victims

Pray the Gay Away draws on theories of domination and oppression—specifically exploring the intersection of religiosity, region, and sexual identity, and, to a lesser extent, class, race, and gender—to analyze the persistence of homophobic attitudes in the Bible Belt, and bell hooks’s theoretical concept of “talking back” to give voice to Bible Belt gays. She describes talking back as an essential act of resistance by an oppressed, marginalized group “that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible.” It is speech, visibility, and the sharing of stories that transform marginalized groups from objects to subjects in the eyes of the dominant culture. Because Bible Belt gays see and hear constant reminders that we are unwelcome outsiders, many move away from homophobic, conservative areas to more open, or at least more anonymous, urban ones. Pray the Gay Away shifts the “center” of analysis to explore the experiences and insights of the ones that stay.

In her research on South African LGBT activism, the feminist sociologist Ashley Currier observed a tendency among those from more progressive parts of the globe to perceive those from less progressive areas as “victims” who have little to add to the conversation on gay rights and social change. Currier argues:

Such normative ethnocentrism also prevents Northern LGBT activists from recognizing that they can learn from LGBT activists in the global South because Northern activists continue to see Southern activists as always, already victims. This perception is unfortunate because it keeps LGBT activists in the United States, for instance, from approaching activists in South Africa, who secured marriage equality for same-sex couples, for advice about how to persuade lawmakers and the general public to support marriage equality in the U.S.

Likewise, Bible Belt gays are more than victims. Because many of us daily interact with conservative Christians, we have valuable strategies to offer to those who live in more progressive areas. On the front lines of the culture wars in the United States, we have hard-won insights to offer sexuality
scholars, activists, and the general public. The Bible Belt gays you will meet in the following pages—for example, Brother Damien who critiques the Christian Right on theological grounds, Linda who engaged in intensive Bible study to reconcile her conservative Christian upbringing with her emerging understanding of her lesbian identity, and Will, experienced in forming allies with progressive local groups—have insider perspectives on Bible Belt Christianity. As Terry, a white lesbian, who is 29 and from Eastern Kentucky, explained, “We speak fundamentalist Christianity. We are interpreters and liaisons. We know that fundamentalists are not crazy. They are wrong. And there is a difference.” Bible Belt gays learn early the lesson I was just figuring out: you need to be careful who you let in your home and your backyard when you are gay. You don’t give up your privacy and risk insult or injury for the low reward of some freely offered yard work.