University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
Queer BIPOC Placemaking Oral History Project
Interviewee: L.C., University of Illinois PhD student and staff member
Interviewer: Chanelle Davis, MSLIS student
April 8, 2025
Length: 58:31[1]

Chanelle Davis: All right, so today is April 8, 2025. This is Chanelle Davis, and we're going to be doing an oral history interview about community building and place-making, um, as queer person of color at the University of Illinois. So thank you again for agreeing to this interview. I'd like to start off by learning how you identify as a member of the queer community, and then how do you identify racially and ethnically as well?

L.C.: In the community, I identify as a queer trans person or transmasculine individual. Race wise, I'm Black.

CD: Thank you, and can you also just tell me a little bit more about yourself and your background?

L.C.: Sure, I'm, um, originally from Augusta, Georgia. I say Augusta because nobody knows what Grovetown is, um, but I'm a native Georgian. Um, I grew up with educators as—parents, as educators, and I went to a historically Black college, Paine College, and got my degree in business information systems. I worked in tech support and a lot of different fields. And I started a master's program in computer science, only to discover that I really wasn't passionate about programming. And I had heard about librarianship, and I transferred to Florida State's master's program in library information science, or information studies at that time, is what they called it. And I completed my degree in that, and I focused on web services. And my first professional position as a librarian was at NOAA Miami Regional Library. So I worked there for about five years, and then I moved here to Illinois in 2013, and I've been here ever since as an engineering and physical sciences research data services librarian, and I'm also a PhD student at the University of Illinois. I started that program in Fall 2020 in information science, and that's me. (overlap) Lots of hats, lots of different, different ways we can go with this (both laugh).

CD: Well, I actually want to know more about what it was like growing up in, was it, Grove- (overlap) Grovetown. Grovetown, Georgia. What was that like?

L.C.: Growing up in Georgia was an interesting experience. I say interesting because when I was growing up, especially looking at it now versus then, and I know change happens in towns, but it was a real small town. There was like, the yellow grocery store and the post office. Then they got the IGA was

[1]**Transcriber's Note**: Parts of this interview were edited for privacy purposes at the request of the narrator. A pseudonym was used, and some parts of the interview were removed from the audio and transcript. However, these edits did not change the meaning of the conversation. The narrator also made additional edits and corrections that are noted with [CORRECTION –L.C.] within the transcript.

the grocery store, but you had to go to Augusta for everything. Now, you don't. It was a very small community. It was rural in the sense that it was primarily white people. Um, I saw more Black people when I went to church because my parents were both church laity, and later in high school, my father became an ordained pastor. So in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, so, the church community was where you saw a myriad of Black people who were teachers, who were doctors, who were lawyers, who were nurses, state representatives, business owners. They really talked heavily about the importance of education, whether you went to college, or you learned some type of trade or skill that you would sustain yourself and take care of yourself. So it was—you were going somewhere. You were doing education in college, you were doing vocational programs, you were doing hair, you were going to the military. That was something that they talked about all the time. So that was like a mix, compared to when I went to school, you didn't see as many Black people in my high school and in my middle school. You could count us in numbers. But then on the weekend, it was like you got this ultra Black experience. So it was, okay, on the weekend, I see people who look exactly like me, who have my same family, you know, structure or similar, compared to in school. You—they did or, I didn't really talk to them on that level other than, "Hey, how you doing?" when you in school. I did not really interact with the people on that level in school, and it was also because my parents were extremely, um, protective. I grew up very sheltered, and so I remember going to high school, telling my dad that I wanted to go to the football game, and he said he would go with me. And I was mortified. I was like, There's no way. (both laugh) So I never went to anything (laughs) because, you know, because I was like, I had a cousin who had gone to that same high school some years before. And I was like, I don't remember Uncle Charles ever saying that he was going to the game. And I just felt, you know, mortified. So I didn't go to anything and, you know, so I just went to school, and then I went to my, like, church activities. So it was very compartmentalized life of living in a small town that now it's a bigger—it's still not huge. Don't tell my mom I said it, but (laughs) in her mind, compared to what we had, she's right, it is bigger than what we had at that time. So yeah.

CD: Would you say you appreciated, like, having that representation where you were able to see Black people in the church? Did you appreciate that sense of community there?

L.C.: I don't think I—I won't say I didn't appreciate it. I didn't know what it was at that time. I think later in life, I really appreciate it now. Looking back then, it was just kind of like, okay, cool. You know, this is the way life is. I didn't—I don't know. I struggle to say "appreciation." I think I don't know what meaning I would give it, you know, then, not while I was in it. You know, I definitely knew that there was a difference between where I went to school and the way, you know, white people and Black people's interactions were versus the way they were in church. But I didn't have, like, language to say why that was, and it wouldn't—it seems to be an oversimplification or overgeneralization, to say it was solely about race. It was, but I don't think I knew that at—not then I was just like, well, this is just how these white people are and discovered, and a lot of that discovery of race and what it meant and how they saw it, I didn't really get that until, like, maybe high school, and it was, like, senior year. I remember we were just having a conversation with some people, and I had known those students since I

was in fourth, fifth, and sixth grade because our parents were teachers. And I remember this little girl. She wasn't a little girl then, she was now a high school student, and we were talking about interracial marriage. I don't know how that came up. And when she said, "Black and white people came from two different worlds, and they should not be together," I was like, "We've been friends since fourth grade, and I never knew you thought that. You have never said that out loud." And I just remember, and it wasn't like a hurt or sadness, it was just like, it was a realization that we really do live different lives in a way that I had not seen that before. And it wasn't just white versus Black. Um, Black students that I went to school said I talk different, so they would use me to call for jobs for them because they were like, "They'll know that I'm Black, you call," and I would call and do all the talking for them to get them to interview, and then they would go. And I never really saw that as negative. I didn't even really know—I was like, I don't know why I talk the way that I talk. I was like, my parents are teachers. My mother had me read to her. You know, growing up, there was church programs. There were things I always had to do so that preparation they were doing that—I was involved in that since I was six. I mean, as a church person, I sang and, you know, played the piano and did different things in church activities, so that presentation speaking thing, we was doing that at six. And with teachers, my dad used to make me do oral book reports. So, stop (laughs). I was doing an oral exam in high school to tell what I read and why I thought the way that I thought, and where did I get that from? You sure you think that, and not from a confrontation, but just, like, learning to explain why you think that and standing on that. So that's where that came from.

CD: Do you feel like your parents' values and their, like, roles as educators influenced your own educational path and your interests?

L.C.: To a degree. I think, initially, I did not want to be a teacher because when I got to college, I did not know what I wanted to major in. I knew I was supposed to be there, but I did not know what I wanted to major in. So I always find it amazing, and I cheer people on when they get a gap year, or when their people let them figure it out first because I did not know what I wanted to major in. And my school was so small that when you were registering, you could literally see everybody else's major as you register for your classes. And I wanted to say undeclared, and they told me that I couldn't do undeclared, and so I literally went, eenie, meenie, meenie, miney, moe, on the list because there were education people that were like, I'm going to teach high school, I'm going to teach elementary, I'm going to teach special education. Me and science were not friends. Surprised that I'm an information scientist in training, but science then, we weren't friends. Me and math was an absolute struggle. So I was like, and then, my mother, they had talked down on sociology. They were like, don't major in sociology. You'll make straight A's, but where will you work? Later, I've met so many of my friends are licensed clinical social workers that it blows my mind. But I was like, okay, cool. I didn't know enough about sociology to really fight them on that, so I picked-- selected business information systems, and I can still remember my mother saying that I should take education courses as a backup in case I didn't get a job. So I—which, you know (laughs), which I'm like, I think she was doing that as a support, but it didn't feel like support, or her version of support. But, um, definitely seeing them be educators was influential and

impactful, but not at that time because teaching was the one thing that I ran like, I don't want to do any of that at all. And even later, becoming a librarian, they know media specialists, but a media specialist in the role of K through 12 is not what I ever did in—at NOAA or even, you know, at Grainger here. So I can say, as far as seeing educators, or seeing it, you know, and learning about continuing your education, yes. They're definitely—or like their work ethic of being on time. My dad would talk to mantras, "If you're on time, you're late," or being prepared. So there's certain values in work ethic that I can completely attribute to them.

Other things, not so much because my parents did not know how to handle LGBTQ+ identity. They didn't know what to do with that, but they connected with me on the research. When I got this job as a librarian, my father was very influential and impactful, and my mother still since my father since passed. But my mother has been helpful in talking to me, or she understands it to a degree because she has master's. Um, but yeah. So it was to a point, absolutely, and then to another other point of my life, I felt like adulthood, when I got to LGBTQ+, I needed other parents because mine, they didn't know what to do with that. They didn't know how to be supportive.

CD: Is it okay if we talk about that aspect of your journey now?

L.C.: Sure, sure.

CD: How long did you know you identified as a member of the LGBTQ community?

L.C.: I think, if I'm being absolutely honest, I knew from childhood that there was something different about me. I could not put it into words. I could not articulate it. There were definite signs that, especially in terms of gender, that I was not necessarily—even though I was biologically born, you know, female, there was definite signs. I had no connections to it because my mother often talked about coming to, like, pre-K and to pick me up and from—because it was on an army base, and all of the other girls were in a specific area playing, you know, with dolls and things like that. And I was leading the tricycle race and winning (both laugh).

CD: I love that.

L.C.: And with my cousins, you know, we would always race with tricycles and bicycles. I can remember my uncle, you know, betting me money that I could go to school and not get, you know, dirty, because it never happened. I look like I played to the full, and my mother dressed me. And one day a week, she would make me wear a dress. I hated. It didn't matter. Me in that dress, it would be rips and tears because I am full on playing. And so I would say—and then I think at age nine, I remember meeting this girl, and she was just nice to me, but I knew I couldn't look her in her face because I thought she was just so beautiful. I didn't know what that meant, per se, but I just knew I thought that she was extremely beautiful. And then I can remember getting to middle school, and when some of my

friends—they were just talking about how they wanted a boyfriend, and they were interested in guys. I had zero—I was like, he look like a man. Okay, you know, you like him, or—I had zero interest in it—but it was something that my mother would talk about because we would have so many conversations about how you have to keep yourself up and things like that. And I felt like she was talking to me, but because I was—often later in life, I said, "I holds the body of—that I was biologically born that, but keep myself up for what? I don't know anything about makeup." She would give me purses, I would leave them everywhere (laughs). It was a lot.

It was up until, like, maybe I was 23, I remember I stopped wearing—I wore a dress one time to visit a friend, and we were going to interviews, and she was the one that looked me in my face and she said, "if you don't want to wear dresses, you know you don't have to wear them." She said, "You can stop. We can go right now and go to the mall, and we can find the clothes that you want to wear." And I remember we went to the mall, and I picked male—what was considered, I don't—I think clothing has no gender now, but was in the men's section. I picked all outfits, and I was like, I'm just going to wear this, and that's just going to be the way that it is. But it was like, that permission of doing that is what I needed or someone else to say it because I can remember growing up, I always looked at, you know, when JCPenney did the catalog or Spiegel, I was always in the men's section going, this is beautiful! But, you know, (laughs) I didn't necessarily have courage to order it or to go over there myself and buy that until, you know, later.

And then also, that cost me a lot in terms of getting the job because in the South, it was very much don't ask, don't tell or—and it was also when they knew that you—because I had the low haircut, masculine-identified or presenting, um, it was very hard to obtain positions that were outside of working the call center. I had a lot of call center jobs, I had a lot of tech support jobs, but anything that required my actual degree, they never really considered me for that because I did not conform to what a female or somebody that identifies or is, you know, gendered, if you will, conformed to. So it was very hard to find livable wage positions. And I left Augusta, and I went to Atlanta [Georgia], and I was living in Lawrenceville [Georgia], working for call centers. And then, I moved to Florida because I was going to the—I did the—they had a post-graduate program for adult education, and I had been teaching adult education in Augusta for a little while, but they only let you do that part time. Um, and so I moved to Tallahassee, and I was in the master's—in their program, and the idea was, you take these 12 hours and then you can transfer into the master's program for adult education. And that's what I was going to do. But that didn't necessarily happen because they did not accept me into the program, even though I made A's and B's. But compartmentally, for jobs, I had to dress a certain way. I had to relax my hair, and wear female-identified clothing, and maybe, you know, unisex clothing on Friday in order for jobs to take me seriously.

And so, I've often felt that my life bears the scars and the wounds from those experiences where you could not be yourself. And it was only this position that I've been in for 11 years, where this was the first position where I could wear this quarter zip and this tie, and no one cared. They listened to me talk about whatever it was I was talking about. Their mood did not change. I could be in all of the meetings, and it

was a—it has been a level of freedom that I never experienced when I lived in Georgia, when I lived in Lawrenceville, and even when I worked at NOAA, it was extremely conservative. I had started, like, at least on Fridays, dressing like [L.C.], you know, wearing jeans or the button, you know, the dress shirts and pants. But I knew it wasn't necessarily the right—it was extremely conservative because I can remember when same-sex marriage was going on or just discussions of that and listening to how people talked about it in the library. And it wasn't just in the library, because that library was located in a laboratory, and I was like, there are gay people in this lab! These two people down here, they married, and you have negative views of same-sex people. And I was just like, I can't—I don't think I can come out and be myself. And I remember when I got the interview here, I was—my wife was like, okay. She was like, "Well, you going to the interview?" I was like, "Yeah." She was like, "What we going to wear?" And I remember the "what we're going to wear" made me want to fall out in this floor because I was like, if I'm authentically myself, will I miss out on this job? What will I do? And so, I decided, well, I'll wear this because it was also cold when I came here, it was like January 9 of 2013, and I wore a dress—a sweater vest, a dress shirt, and some pants and dress shoes. And then I wore a woman's pants suit but a male dress shirt underneath it and no tie for the presentation because I was like, I just can't chance that if I put this tie on—and I didn't have a suit either, I had no—I had dress shirts and maybe sweaters and ties and pants, but I had no suits at that time. So I didn't really even have, like, a business suit to wear anymore. So I had borrowed my wife's, you know, suit to wear to the interview. And the actual first suit that I owned was a suit I got married in because we got it, and I picked out what I wanted to wear, but I didn't have any of that. So it was like, well, I come to this interview, and I was like, well, I'm going to just, I'm going to mix it up. So I was very much [L.C.] for the dinner interview that you had that night before, and then I put that pants suit outfit on, and, um, later when I got that job, I was like, we're not doing none of that because I'm already hired. I'm going to put these ties on, and that's just going to be the way that it is. But I noticed nobody gave a shit, so (laughs).

So, but, and then that's interesting, but I bring it up because now, as I'm transitioning to—I'm in the PhD program for information science, and it's not that I don't want to be a librarian anymore. I'm really curious about what type of jobs I'll be interested in, or what types of positions that I will work in. It comes up again with like, where we going to go? Will I have to compartmentalize myself again to be—because information science is not necessarily the University Library. So, and it's not just staying in Illinois, either, because for me, I knew, as much as I love it here, I have aging parents. I knew I couldn't stay here and just, you know, not attend or at least oversee their care, especially now that it's just my mother and my brother. So it's kind of like, I'm finishing this program, and yes, I have made tenure in the library, but at some point I might not be here, or there'll be another decision that needs to be made. But that—the identity piece is like, well, will it be okay in information science? And I've been going to different communities for conferences, and then it's interesting too, because when you tell people, I—my dissertation proposal is examining Black, queer and trans people—trans individuals' information practices in online environments, in daily life. You say that to scholars who are asking you, "What are you working on?" And you get the, "Oh, that's so great!" And they don't know anything else to say. So, it's like you're thinking, do you really know what I said? Or you don't know what else to say? And I was

like, you know, you're living in this administration where there's an executive order that says there's only two genders. There's taking "trans", "queer" out of things, and then here I come, with the audacity (laughs) to study, you know, I'm like, well, how do I make this topic more palatable? And it's so many things that I face within myself and doing the topic. But I know I chose to continue my education because I wanted to be a better researcher. I was already doing research in the library, and it's great, but I just wanted to expand and grow. And then once I took this data ethics course, it opened up all these other things, and I was just like, Well, you know, Jesus, I'm just going to have to say it with my chest and just you—you just going to have to be uncomfortable. But that's not my uncomfortability, that's yours.

CD: Absolutely.

L.C.: So, you know, it's definitely, uh, learning to practice because last night was the first time I gave a talk in a class of master's students, and I, like, said what I'm studying out loud, and gave, like, a mini proposal defense, but it really wasn't. It was just kind of, like, what I have so far. But I was like, alright, we saying it, but I'm like, I'm glad it's on Zoom because I—that way I don't have to read the room because I'm very good at interpreting body language. I can tell in five minutes you uncomfortable (laughs). You don't want to be here, and I don't know what you're doing, so, you know, it's good to be on Zoom for that. So, it's an interesting experience to be yourself and to have spaces where, in some spaces it's absolutely okay, and then other spaces it's not. And we don't even have time to talk about how it's—in some spaces, it has been safe to be LGBTQ, but it has not been safe to be Black, which is hilarious to me because when you see me, you see Black. You may or may not suspect, you may or may not know LGBTQ+, but you see this melanin. There's no way for me to hide that or compartmentalize that, and that speaks for me in the space because when you look in the space, like when I go to these conferences, information science or in University Library experiences, how many people do you see that look like me? And when I got here in 2013, I think there were only tenured librarians. There were two. One was retiring, and another one I had met—I'm not saying that that doesn't count the people of color, I'm just saying, when I'm thinking, look like me, I'm like, Black. Black and something but Black. So, seeing, you know, and then you go to these conferences, and then you start counting, how many of us are there? You're like, oh, two, oh. And it's the same thing repeats because I was just at a conference in Indiana, and I looked in the room, and I was like, there are four of us, and I think you two work here (both laugh). So, you here, but you, you not, like, in—or informatics, you—you, oh, okay, (laughs).

CD: I want to hear more about spaces where you have felt affirmed in all of your identities, and we can go back to the earliest moment where maybe you felt affirmed, like, if it was in childhood or in high school, where maybe you confided in someone or there was a space where you felt comfortable. Um, I'd also love to hear about what the transition was like going to an HBCU [Historically Black College or University], and if you were able to find community there. And then I want to bring us to here at the University of Illinois, what that's been like. But yeah, I guess if we can trace it linearly.

L.C.: Linearly affirmed, um, growing up in my household, like I said, I felt loved. I'm not saying I don't feel that my parents love me. They did provide—I had, you know, I always had access to resources, access to a place to stay. I had the walls, food, clothing, shelter. Emotional support, it felt a bit limiting, once, you know, coming out to them was—they were not supportive at all about that. Um, and then for a long time, we had, like they just called to make sure that you're alive, like, maybe five to seven minutes, but we had no real, deep conversation. And, so for me, during that time, affirmation actually came through my first long-term girlfriend's mother. And the hilarious thing, for lack of a better word, was that her mother and father, both of them are now deceased, and grandparents were equally as religious as my parents, but her parents gave me the PFLAG[1] experience in my 20s to know what it was like that they didn't care and they wanted to know, not just because I was dating their daughter, but I called her Mama Ernestine. Mama Ernestine would talk to me about my goals, my dreams. She would encourage, empower me, you know, and I still talked to her even after my relationship with her daughter was over, I would call and say, "Thank you," because she was a real lifeline. And her grandparents, they were very kind to me and-- but it wasn't just to me, that's how they treated everybody because I saw them interact with other people in their community, gay, straight. They were love to me.

Also, I want to say in church ministry. Affirming. Got to fix that. Affirming church ministry. Um, in Florida, I remember finding a church, and, um, it was Church of the Holy Spirit song. And that's where I met Black people, I met gay people, white people, and that was very empowering, encouraging to my growth when I was living in Florida from 2008 to 2013.

There was also an experience where I had joined the LGBTQ fraternity, Alpha Lambda Zeta, and that at that time was masculine of center lesbians, but being around certain people in my—the group I crossed with, the first, "the ace", as they call them, um, my line sister, Tricie, she and her wife, introduced me to my wife. And although she's since passed, her wife is still alive, and I have another friend in the same group. We talk. We actually talked because my wife is in Maryland, and, um, we talk.

So those like—so I think like fraternity experiences, church experiences, Mama Ernestine, those people—and then later I met another ministry. It doesn't exist anymore, but I met a person there. They've been my spiritual mentor and friend, J.M. Triplett. And so, there have been different people, friend groups, that have filled in to be that affirming space, that encouraging, empowering space for me. So, it wasn't necessarily when I didn't get it in my biological, childhood home. Um, there are other people, and—that makes me laugh, also, or smile because Mama Ernestine used to say, "You do have one mom and one dad, but Jesus sends you plenty steps." So, I have gotten plenty steps of people who are siblings, friends that step in to be support in so many different ways. So yeah.

[1] PFLAG is a national organization that supports LGBTQ+ people and those who love them. PFLAG was founded in 1972 after Jeanne Manford marched with her son, prominent gay activist Morty Manford, at the 1972 Christopher Street Liberation March in New York.

CD: I love that. Thank you for sharing.
L.C.: No problem.

CD: So, I know you mentioned earlier being a little worried about how you would present when it was time to interview at the University of Illinois. Correct?

L.C.: Yes, right.

CD: So I'm curious to know what drew you here, what encouraged you to accept. Was it feeling kind of relaxed once you came and noticing how people kind of reacted to you? Um, I guess I'm just curious to know, like, what was the draw.

L.C.: Permanent employment. Hope you can say that (laughs) because at NOAA, when I started that position, I was a contractor, and the idea was that you will work three years and that you would apply to be a federal librarian. But that did not happen, um, for different reasons. And now I don't—I think the one librarian that I worked with—well my former boss had retired in 2014, 2015. And then the my co-worker applied and became the director of that library. And I talked with her, like, right when the pandemic started, and she was saying, before the pandemic started, she was thinking about retiring, but she had already sold one house and bought another one in Mount Dora [Florida], which is nowhere near Key Biscayne [Florida]. So it's like, so you getting ready to leave. So you just, you know, biding your time. So I don't even think, now, you know, it's got a, like, active physical librarian. And the contractor that replaced me, she stayed, like, a couple of years, but even when she got hired, they were already saying that they were moving things in the line offices, and they did not know if contractors were coming too. So it was like the writing was on the wall that that would not necessarily be a permanent place to stay.

So I had already started applying for jobs, and I was looking for a job that provided the non-contractor experience, the non-working on soft funds. And even though, you know, coming here it was—it's a tenure-track position, so you're probationary, but you at least knew you had three years to show them something, and if you didn't, you at least got one more year, and you had to apply for your own job. So it gave more promise of strength of funding. There was the fact that I had never been an assistant professor before, and so that was hilarious, because I'd always just been a librarian. So when you're—after you I got accepted, and you're writing these people, because somebody was going to show my wife, like, apartments and houses and stuff. And I remember they were writing, and they wrote "Assistant Professor," and I, no lie, like I remember saying to my wife, "Who's Assist--?" She was like, "You, you!" (both laugh). I was like, "Oh my bad." I was like, "Who is this assistant professor (laughs)?" She was like, "That's your title!" I was like, "Oh, okay." (laughs) So I was like, no one has ever—because I was like, I've been a librarian, but I was like, that assistant professor, like, okay, all right. That's who I am, all right. Okay, great.

So (laughs), so it was those experiences of moving here and then even moving here, it felt like—I was scared. I was scared to tell them that I had a wife because I don't think I said that I had a wife because I was like, I don't know what the job—because, I mean, it probably, to go back and hear this back will probably sound very odd, but if you've had the experience of the way that they treated me in jobs, to now get a job that's now this supposed stature of assistant professor, it was like, will it change if they know I'm gay? What will I do? But later I learned it never really would have mattered because people move here in all of the departments, and they have wives, they have husbands, they have whatever. And some people do find people jobs, which later, I had talked to human resources, and the lady had reached out, and then she [L.C.'s wife] ended up finding a position with the facility and services where she worked for about four or five years before going to Maryland.

But, yeah, it was carrying the trauma of that, of those experiences that—I do remember, you know, going to, like, one of those events over at the [Illini] Union, where you meet all of the different, you know, eight, you know, affinity groups. And I remember this white lady saying to me, because it was the LGBTQ+ table, and she was telling me, "You'll be safe here." That's interesting that she said that because I can remember when I first went to Faith United Methodist Church, because we were looking for churches, and I remember when the pastor at that time said, "You going to be safe here." And I was like, nobody really said that to me. I don't know really what to do with that. And they were right, with that particular pastor, Pastor Brad, absolutely, we were safe. It was really great to go to church there. But, you know, being a preacher's kid myself, you know, pastors move, so when they move, a different pastor comes. I'm not saying she was not great. It just was not the same. So it just, you know, and I think during the pandemic, it just—I found a way to just not go, and I have not been back to that church. And even though I've gone to Bethel AME, which they seem nice. I don't really know if I always trust—and it's, it is what it is—if I trust Black queer transness within Blackness (laughs) because oftentimes Black people make you feel like it's separate or when they talk to you because I've gone to other Black churches, they ask you, "How's your friend?" (laughs)

CD: They still doing that?

L.C.: They still doing that (laughs). "How's your friend, how's your--?" Like, friend? Who got a friend at my age? So, but culturally, I'm like, that's what you—you have people who still use that language. So, it's almost kind of similar to now "partner." "Partner" used to be the way you—"partner", "they/them", and "we" used to be how, growing—at least for me—back when I was a BG, baby gay, is how you knew other people were gay, too, because they used "they, them, we, we, we" all the time and "partner." But now—and I'm not saying you shouldn't, but now people will say "partner", and they got a whole dude, and I'm like, All right, cool, that's your partner. I'm not saying it isn't, but it means—those words mean different things. And I think there's, generationally, reasons for that, so. Which is why—but then that's also true to some lesbians are very upset about the word "queer". They don't want to be called queer. Which I've heard that because I knew the old school lesbians (laughs) when I came out. So I've heard that, but I'm like, Let it go, friend. Let people be. Whatever you want to be, be it (laughs).

However you—get to choose, you get to decide. You tell me what you want me to call you, and I'll call you that. Cool, great. And then just, you know, I'm not—no judgment. We listen and we don't judge (laughs).

CD: So, you got here in 2013, correct, for the assistant professor position?

L.C.: Yeah, I was in the engineering library, uh-huh.

CD: **So when did you start the PhD program?**

L.C.: I started the PhD program in fall of 2020.

CD: Okay, and what led to that?

L.C.: I had, um, I was doing research, and I liked it, and I wanted to get better at it. And I just thought continuing my education would allow me to do that. It would allow me to learn other methodologies. And at that time, I thought, You know what, we'll just keep doing this area, we'll just, you know, it'll just broaden, is what I thought. That's literally what I wrote my essay about. And it was also the fact that when I was asking people—it's going to sound—just, when I was asking people, "Once you make tenure, how does your job change? What is it that's different about you?" And they were like, "Oh, well, you know, people do different things," which they weren't lying. I have seen people who make tenure, some people continue the same thing, they're publishing, they're going to conferences, they just do their job. Some people go the administration track. They apply to be unit heads. And some people go full-out service, whether that's service in the University Library or service in these different professional library associations. So, and then they also put you on more committees because when you're tenure-track, they really, really, really in the library, that is, they really try to hold your time so that you have all the time you need to focus on your research. So they only let you be a part of two committees. After tenure, that's not how they do. They come look for you (laughs). They find you so. [I was really interested in becoming a better researcher, trying out different methodologies. –L.C.]

So I was like, Yeah. So I said, Well, I should just go ahead and try to apply for the program and see what happens. And I applied, and I just remember feeling very comfortable about it. I wasn't nervous because I had applied to a PhD program before in 2008 when I first got to NOAA. And every—in every university I applied to, including this one, rejected me. And I remember I went to a conference, that was here at the iSchool [School of Information Sciences], and I was able to talk to the then dean, Unsworth, and ask him how I could improve my application. University of Illinois was the only school that showed me my application and told me how I can improve it. I was like, well, that's cool, you know, I thanked him so much for letting me know. I went through the rest of the conference. It was cool. I applied again. This time I had, you know, research publications because at that time when I applied, they didn't necessarily know if I could do any research other than the fact that I had one or two classes. The

recommendation letters that were written, only one person, my boss at that time, actually wrote about my strength as a possible, you know, successful person in a PhD program. The other two people, they didn't say that. They didn't say anything negative, but they didn't say anything that strengthened. So I really learned, when you write a recommendation letter, you have to tell them they are fit for a job or fit for school. You have to say that because other people will not know. So I, like I said, I applied, and, um, then they sent me an email and told me they were going to interview me. That was new because I was like, What do you mean?

At that point, I went and told my boss about it because I was always like, "Look, I know I made tenure, and I'm applying for this PhD program," I said, "But I want you to know that if I get accepted, I'm going to give 100% just like I did." I don't think you needed to tell that, but I'm Black, so I realized the rules work different for us than they do for other people. So I just wanted to be on the up and up. And then also, I noticed too, you know, when I was asking them, especially once we were in the pandemic and everybody was working from home, it's kind of like I felt like I was telling them, "I'm available. Let me know if you need anything." Didn't nobody need me. So I mean, I was doing my job, but it was very, very quiet, and I was like, I was pumped, and I just went full in on research and classes, and—which was the most productive time for me. I loved working from home because I could focus, um, and then it was like that spring, they remembered (both laugh). Because it was like, that fall, no one said nothing to me. I was like, I—Okay. I can just kind of, like, let me in coach. They won't let you in. So, yeah, so it was that experience, and then they remembered.

And then, like I said, I applied to the PhD program, and I got accepted. They gave me two advisors. So, (laughs) I wrote my narrative ten [numerous –L.C.] times. Part of that was because you're writing about your field, you're talking about how your research question—what your research questions are, who your research questions are in conversation with, and you also have your list of thirty citations that are going to be a part of your field exam. And I was writing and rewriting, they would all—one of them, the chair would always say, "You're close." I was sending to the other two committee members, and they never said anything. So I was under the impression that if your chair was good, you were good. Well, we got toward the end, and then the second committee member is like, "I know you wanted to take your test, but I think you need to address this and this. So you'll probably, instead of taking it in the fall, you'll take it in the spring." I address their concerns that December. I'm like, okay, cool, I addressed them. Let's meet with the chair and talk about, like, well, just even if we don't, like, solidify because it's getting ready to be the holiday, let's just talk about, you know, when I could possibly sit for my field exam. But when we got in that conversation on that Zoom Room, and I said about setting up, you know, or at least talking about taking the field exam, that's what she said, "I can't help you. This isn't my field." And she opened up a website and showed me all the people in the iSchool. I was like, Okay, this is where we are.

I talked to my now advisor, like, right before Christmas, and signed the form. And in January, that's what happened. I'm not mad at the "no" or the fact that they—that they—I'm not mad at the "no". You know, the fact they don't teach faculty, mentor—it's sad to me, they don't teach faculty how to mentor [I

shared this experience with a mentor, and she stated" everything is relationships, they don't teach faculty how to mentor. –L.C.] And some people are just mirroring relationships that they were given. They're not necessarily conscious or actively aware that what they're doing is not helpful. So, what do you do with all of that?

CD: That sounds really tough, first of all. I'm really sorry you had to experience that. What do you feel? Or do you feel anything helped you feel like, "I can still be successful. I can still do the research that I want to do, even though I've had like this challenge."

L.C.: Other groups. Qual Scholars, with Dr. Marvette Lacy, and all of those amazing Black women (laughs) and people of color. The Wells Group with Dr. Della, and the queer, trans, and non-binary counseling and psychology students have been very—teachers that I've had in classes that either are still here or go someplace else, but you still maintain, you know, relationships with them. Those type of experiences have been helpful to be like, Yeah, this is shit. This is absolutely shit, but you know what, we're going to finish because, you know, I think when you're in the PhD program, whether you work here full time or not, you're often faced with, why are you doing a PhD? What is your why? Or as my friend (laughs), she's no longer here, but a good friend of mine told me, ToyaLynn Ward, used to say—we used to say, years ago, What's my motivation (laughs)? You have asked yourself that a lot because, and it's not just to be in the PhD program. I think that's to live in life as Black, as LGBTQ because every single part of our identity is contested, and we're going to be 100% you know, accurate and truthful. It hasn't been safe no matter who's been in that administrative office. It's just been a little bit better. But it might have been horrible on this end, but now it's like a whole dumpster fire. But the reality is, the ideologies that are existing and problematic have always been there. And then, you know, so that in itself is a whole different subject. And that's not just for LGBTQ+, I think that's just for people period. Humanity care are things that seem extremely abstract for some people. And institutions, organizations, business, and governments are going to are going to do all the things.

But it does not necessarily mean that they cannot be caring people within all of those things. So when you do get them, hold on to them, appreciate them because you don't want to necessarily meet your mentors in all these spaces when those spaces have eaten them alive because that will change how they meet them. And that does happen because places do eat you alive when you're trying to achieve your goals, you're trying to do a thing, and it's not what you thought or, God forbid, people have to sell their soul to make it. Who you have to be to get this thing. And I think for me, one thing I was very conscientious of in this program was that being well and balanced mentally, emotionally was extremely necessary because the tenure-track me, there were some things that got off balance. I might have been excellent at work, but I was not necessarily excellent at being a good spouse or aware of anybody else's goals but mine. And so later, when you have that, come to yourself, come to Jesus, whatever you want to call it, moment (laughs), sitting in your life. You're like, What I want to do different? And then you're like, This is how I'm going to, you know, this is important, but this is not the only thing. So how do you

live this full life and enjoy your life? And it's not just solely, I got to get this goal because it's horrible to get to the goal in your body and your life fall apart. But you got the goal, so.

CD: Yeah, for sure. I just have two more questions and we can wrap up. So I think you bring just a really interesting perspective as a, like, full-time staff member of the University and as a student, and I'm curious to know if there's anything you haven't shared yet about how you've been able to make a place for yourself here, holding those two roles and considering your identities, anything you haven't spoken about yet? Where you've been able to maybe find friends, or.

L.C.: I think for me, finding friends has been out—I mean, there definitely been some wonderful relationships made from people I've met as a student, and then, like, some surface-level connections made with people that you know you meet as a student and as a person that works. But a lot of the deeper relationships have been with people who did not necessarily live here, or now they do, but they didn't then. And then, I think, too heavy on the I often have found that I stay in my office and mind my business. I mean, I'm very nice and personable. I will speak to everybody. If you want me to work on a project, I'm happy to do my part, but I also don't try to, um—I'm also oblivious, in many cases, because I feel like when you get too involved or too into stuff, shit fall apart (laughs). But it's also the fact that I realized that I didn't—you know, until I became a student and sat on the student boards, I did not know that students had hard times. I did not know that because all I knew is that I worked at the library and I would help a student do anything they asked me to do. And those were my experiences. But then once, you know, I started the program during the pandemic, and you were sitting on—I can't remember what board it was I was sitting on, and you're listening to different student experiences, and you're like, "What place y'all describing? That happened here? Where?" You know, because it's like—but then it's like, how would you know? Because I'm over at—even before the pandemic, I'm over at Grainger. I go to whatever the library is for the meeting, or show up in the Zoom Room, and then I get on the bus or get in my car. I don't know because I'm not taking any—I mean, I've taken classes when I worked full-time to, like, learn more about research, but I wasn't pursuing a program. So other than that class experience, I didn't know that this place and space can be different depending upon who you are and how you show up.

And then it's like, I have duality, and so it's like, well, but I also realized that over there in Information Science, I don't show up as Associate Professor. I just don't. I just show up as I'm in this class. I'm trying to, you know, show me, you know, can you show me how to do this? And you learn a lot. You learn that some people are great facilitators and teachers, some people are researchers and some people are not all three. It's some—but that's not a diss. That's just—that can happen, I think, the same way in the library. Some people are great librarians, but they're not great researchers, or they're great at service, but they're not great at all three because people have different skill sets. People have different goals. So it's a constant learning and cognizance that you have to be aware of who you are and what is that you want, and what you going to do with that. And you doing that every day, all day. It is exhausting (laughs) because often times it feels like you're the only individual—not you as in me, you, us are the only

person. But it's like a lot of people, you realize they don't live their life that way, and it's like, okay, cool. I can't make you, but, and I that's not my job. But that conscious awareness that some people are completely good with disconnecting and living in cognitive dissonance and selective amnesia, and that's good for them. All right (laughs). (overlap) Let it be. Let it be. That's where you at. Meet you where you at, leave you where you are (laughs).

CD: Exactly. So my last question for you is, what would you like to see at the University of Illinois that you feel would make queer people of color feel more affirmed, and feel that community building and place-making was more possible on this campus. I know it's a loaded question, I'm sorry. (both laugh)

L.C.: You know, here's one thing I found it interesting that other departments do, like—as the student me—other departments have done really, or seem to do really good, with having symposiums where they let the students present on research topics. Information Science struggles with that because it's like when you go to somebody to try to get money for speaker fees or coffee (laughs), it becomes, like, you just want to beat your head on that door because I don't know who I need to ask, but the answer is just feels like a hard, "No." But yet, you watch other people have it, and it's like, I think people—representation is important because you want to see yourself, um, or see others that are—even if it's not you in the in the embodiment of your race or your identity—maybe it's people that embody the research that you're interested in. And it's like, it seemed like during the pandemic, the University did a really good job, or at least it was publicly available information of where these talks were, but it seemed like once those restrictions were lifted, that information, or at least the ability to see where it is, has disappeared. So I don't know—because Sociology used to have some really great talks. I don't know if those talks still happen, and if it just closed back off to departmental information. So that share—and it's hilarious because we're talking about sharing information as information science (both laugh), and it just seems like there's little walls of who, and I don't understand why that is when it comes to getting talks or getting people to come when you're trying to build those resources. And it's frustrating to the point where you're like, I wanted to have this event, and I was like, You know what? I'm going to just focus on going to work every day and doing my program because it's too much. I don't have the money to pay for this. So, it's cool, you know. I go to what I can, but I think that's what I would like to—I wish there were more opportunities for that. I wish people thought to—sometimes when you watch conversations and how administration talks in broad strokes, and faculty and staff talking every day. I sometimes wish they could—administration or people—remember the difference and brought that conversation down to the everyday. And I see that oftentimes. So it feels like the Charlie Brown experience, and watching these meetings. It's like, y'all don't see that? I'm not saying that what you said is not important. Y'all are not having the same conversation in the same space, so both of you are leaving frustrated. And I don't know whose job that is to fix that. And I'm not saying that they will or should, it's just really interesting to watch and go. The broad strokes are always important. They teach us to do that when you're doing your tenure packet, you got to talk in every day and then talking in broad. But some people get stuck there. And I'm like, you got to bring it back over here.

CD: **Now same question as staff, if you will (both laugh).**

L.C.: Staff. How to be a good—you know one thing—they used to laugh at my former, I had a former boss, you used to couldn't tell people that, but I used to say they need to teach, like—because we get to work with grad students. And I'd be like, "We should really teach a class of how not to be the annoying co-worker." We should teach that because we've all worked with them every job, and it's not just the library. I worked all the jobs. So I have worked at the call center, I have worked in in in fast food, retail, church ministry, non-profit. I know people at every level. We need to teach these people. That's a skill because that's another thing, people assume that you have interpersonal skills because you're stellar at librarianship, stellar at research, stellar at service. More than one thing can be true at the same time, but the things don't have to be mutually exclusive, so you can be excellent. But when we're trying to get you in this departmental level for the things, whatever that is, we got to do, you suck. So how can you, like, provide best practices? Because I know you can't control people's behavior, but we don't talk enough about—and I think, like, if we're talking about, like, this is a university, and you talk about in these departments, you have student assistants and graduate assistants. The ability to provide best practices, now, whether you use it or not, that's on you, but to provide that so people know, and we can make it palatable just, how to be better at your—because some people are not good at communicating. You think you are, but you're not. And I'm like, and a lot of times, I think we leave things to that, "They'll figure it out," and they never do. So (laughs) I don't know. And it just feels like an out of body experience to sit in these meetings and watch that, and you just feel like, You don't see that (laughs)? Who going to say it? It'll help, but hey (overlap), but nobody will say it. And I think that's what that was—that's what makes it feel hard is the fact that no one will say it. People really do—I think some people really do want to know how to be better at whatever it is that they do, and you can provide that information in a way that does not mean that you're being arrogant or being a know it all, or that I'm telling you what you should already know. But just, how do you, you know, break through those silos and those barriers and to acknowledge that some things are a barrier when it doesn't need to be? Just saying. But enough of that (laughs).

CD: That was great. That was so real. Thank you.

L.C.: No problem.

END OF INTERVIEW