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While queer people exist everywhere, including within the confines of militarism, rurality, religiosity, and Southernness, their geographies remain underexplored. Thus, this paper examines the state of queer identity and belonging in rural and suburban spaces in the context of a hegemonic military culture in and around Fort Bragg, North Carolina. More broadly, it sheds light on nontraditional aspects of queer geographies by identifying modes of queer life that exist despite the dearth of factors that are typically associated with queer culture. In so doing, this paper also names larger socio-political forces that dampen the possibilities of certain queer modes of existence as well as the potentials of certain queer futures. Lastly, the meager documentation of queer phenomena in the Fort Bragg region has meant, at least for me, a seemingly infinite number of avenues to pursue that almost always led to yet more questions. Within this context, the experiences relayed to me through 28 semi-structured interviews address identity, community, dating, politics, and space.

MUTED VISIONS, ALL-AMERICAN PRIDE: QUEER GEOGRAPHIES OF THE FORT
BRAGG REGION

by

Nathan McMenamin

A THESIS

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Approved by

Dr. John Stehlin

Committee Chair

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the struggle for liberation for all queer and trans people, especially those in the Fort Bragg region.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Nathan McMenemy has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the Sandhills region of North Carolina is America's largest military installation: Fort Bragg. It encompasses some two hundred and fifty square miles, services hundreds of thousands of soldiers and their families, and contributes billions of dollars to the regional and state economies (*The Fayetteville Observer*, 2018). Its name honors Braxton Bragg, Confederate general, slave owner, and war criminal (*Army Technology*, 2019). The physical geography is characterized largely by longleaf pine trees and sandy soil, an attribute which made it easier to condemn "unusable" land in order to wrest it from the African-American, Native, and working-class white farmers of the region at the turn of the twentieth century (Lutz, 2001). In the region's core counties of Cumberland, Hoke, Moore, and Robeson, one encounters a sea of churches and strip malls; homogenous subdivisions and modular homes that frequently tout "Thank You, Jesus" yard signs and Trump flags, the latter continuing to wave in defiance of his November 2020 election defeat. This is an area rife with the signs and signifiers of empire; daily sightings of C-130's or 747's flying overhead, supply convoys lumbering along a main thoroughfare; to say nothing of the incessant live fire exercises that make the ground shake and the windows rattle. Anyone familiar with the celebrated queer neighborhoods of urban centers like Philadelphia, San Francisco, and New York might be perplexed at the queer geographies of this region that are, in many ways, the antithesis of the Gayborhood. What, then, are the contours of queerness in this environment?

Before we can survey *how* this region is queer, we must first define the very word that is integral to this work. There many and varied meanings to this term. Many are familiar with its Victorian-era usage to denote something strange, odd, or out of place; this developed into a slur to lob at those outside of sexual and/or gender norms. It has since be reclaimed by many as a positive and militant umbrella term to encompass any individual who identifies as gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, pansexual, nonbinary, genderqueer, asexual, and so forth. Academically, queer theory

is, according to Teresa de Lauretis (1991) “a double emphasis—on the conceptual and speculative work involved in discourse production, and on the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own discourses and their constructed silences,” (p. iv). Queer seeks to disrupt the so-called normal; not merely for the sake doing so, but because “normal” is a false and oppressive concept that seeks to quash and silence those on its socio-economic and socio-political margins. According to Barker and Scheele (2016), queer theory works against binaries, which “simplify the world into this or that. So, it would question any understanding that has some people under the umbrella [of queer] and some people outside of it,” (p. 13). It is important to note that not all of my participants identified with this term; some, because they felt that, generationally, it did not apply to them, that it was a slur they heard throughout their lives that did not bear repeating in the present. Conversely, one or two were familiar with queer’s radical turn and disavowed *that*. However, many identified with the term as a catch-all for everyone under the LGBTQIA+ alphabet; a mantle of resistance against “the norm” and those who use their place in normal to pass judgement on others perceived “abnormal”?

With a semblance of queer now established, what makes a town a military town? How can base culture (which permeates far beyond the numerous checkpoints, armored vehicles, and concrete barriers that securitize the boundaries of the installation) be qualified to an outsider? One of the images I want to cultivate is that of continuous mobility; an uninterrupted flow of bodies moving to and through this region. Soldiers, and often, their families, PCSing (Permanent Change of Station) here or leaving here after receiving orders to go elsewhere. Others rotate in on a less permanent basis, coming to Fort Bragg for specialized training that might last only three-six months. Further west, in Moore County, others flock to the proliferation of golf resorts and spas dotted across the landscape. Some of these phenomena overlap, but all of these patterns of movement contribute to the socio-cultural makeup of the region, they help to *characterize* the region. It can be witnessed in the morning and late afternoon commutes, not only on Fort Bragg proper, but the various routes that host the throng of motorists traversing from up to an hour away. This trajectory can be witnessed along Vass-Carthage Road between Moore County and

Fort Bragg; heading north along Cliffdale Road from Raeford and various parts of Hoke County to Fort Bragg; or, along Interstate 95 heading north to Fort Bragg from somewhere in Robeson County. For new residents, a spectacularly late morning commute caused by an impassable, slow-moving military convoy a dozen vehicles deep is almost a right-of-passage. These linkages solidify the orientation towards the military base and simultaneously reify that transience as a regional cultural trait. We see its prominence in place names, reminding us as we cruise along the All-American Freeway, passing one of the Morning Jump (a local coffee chain), observing an Army City sandwich shop (another local restaurant chain) while stopped at the red light. Military surplus stores are in abundance, as (increasingly) are the individuals who wear it while standing on corners with signs saying: “Homeless Vet in need of \$\$\$. God Bless the U.S.A.” It’s visible in our monuments and our public history, such as the 82nd Airborne Museum in downtown Fayetteville, although most smaller museums like the Raeford-Hoke Museum or the Malcolm Blue Farm (Moore County) house small bits of military memorabilia. All anxious to show how they too are connected to the military.

While queer people exist everywhere, including within the confines of militarism, rurality, religiosity, and Southernness, their geographies remain underexplored. Thus this paper examines the state of queer identity and belonging in rural and suburban spaces in the context of a hegemonic military culture in and around Fort Bragg, North Carolina. More broadly, it sheds light on nontraditional aspects of queer geographies by identifying modes of queer life that exist despite the dearth of factors that are typically associated with queer culture. In so doing, this paper also names larger socio-political forces that dampen the possibilities of certain queer modes of existence as well as the potentials of certain queer futures. Lastly, the meager documentation of queer phenomena in the Fort Bragg region has meant, at least for me, a seemingly infinite number of avenues to pursue that almost always led to yet more questions. Within this context, the experiences relayed to me through 28 semi-structured interviews address identity, community, dating, politics, and space, all of which have informed the text’s seven chapters. Chapter II contains the literature review. In Chapter III, I discuss the Fort Bragg region

as study area before I break down the various methodologies and frameworks applied to this study, as well as some of the hindrances that manifested throughout the research process.

Chapter IV describes how militarism, religiosity, and Southernness form a regional cultural conservatism that constrains queer identity, with subsections devoted to white supremacy and patriotic correctness, the nuances between church life in different queer communities, and safety and surveillance. Chapter V is concerned with the state of queer social reproduction in the context of this regional defense economy, with special attention devoted to how aspects of the defense economy reinforce right-wing entrenchment in the region, a survey of queer civil society, and queer workplace experiences. Chapter VI addresses the glaring dearth of physical, queer-centric spaces and analyzes the spaces queer people make use of in their absence. Specifically, I unpack the resultant dependence digital apps and social media pages in addition to assessing how aspects of the dominant conservative culture are reproduced, including racial preferences and body shaming. These findings reveal queer geographies that transcend the urban gayborhoods dominated by white, cisgender, middle-class gay men and embody queer lifeways across an array of identities. These everyday experiences and spaces of queerness in a rural, southern, military area illuminate the ways in which the social landscape continues to shift in the American South.



Figure 1-City of Fayetteville moniker

Queer people (especially queer people of a certain age) might recognize the phrase “In the Life,” which can have multiple meanings. Here, I have used it to pay homage to pioneering author Joseph Beam and his groundbreaking anthology of Black gay men’s literature. It draws on the even older colloquialism of referring to oneself or another as being “in the life,” which was to say, of the queer persuasion and lifestyle (Beam, 1986). While it’s urban geographical context cannot be completely transposed onto this rural/suburban locale, Beam’s anthology remains a poignant collection of resilience, dreams, loss, and community that can (and should) be applied to any queer setting. As a young person wrestling with my own sexuality, I found Raeford (Hoke County), the place I had called home since third grade, to be stifling, with no model on how to live my life openly and no map of queer communities and resources to aid me in navigating this terrain. I was a so-called military brat, raised by a father whose career spanned over 20 years in the Air Force, but never contemplated the nuances of my conservative upbringing beyond how to escape it as quickly as possible.

In search of excitement and purpose, I moved to Wilmington, a slightly more progressive university town and port city along the North Carolina coast. Later, in my early twenties I moved to the northeast, to New Castle, Delaware and the Greater Philadelphia region, where, although I felt more at ease as a queer person, I had yet to develop a sense of the factors that led me to feel that way. The interactions of military life, church life, and Southernness were topics I scarcely contemplated until, in a swift and unforeseen act of coming full circle, I eventually ended up back in the town I thought I had escaped permanently, returning to the Fort Bragg region the summer of 2015. As someone who was able to experience the possibilities concomitant with queer spaces in Philadelphia, New York, even Denver and New Orleans, upon returning home to Raeford, I was struck by the noticeable difference in queer culture that I was not attuned to in my teens. Of course, there were noticeable geographic divergences in the way of concentrated urban areas, but I was increasingly curious about what *other* factors might discourage concentrations of queer space in this region.

D. Soyini Madison (2018, p. 6) writes that “positionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our interlocutor.” This work continues to be a process of self-transformation, of remaining conscientious *that* I position myself, rather than attempting to satisfy an archaic form of apolitical “objectivity” that denies lived experience and other forms of knowledge as valid. In the effort to be reflexive, I must of course name my positionality and worldview and what that brings to bear on research and the researched. How did/does my positionality as a white, cisgender, queer man affect my ability to maneuver amongst those of my community who may be on the receiving end of certain racial and gender power dynamics that I had never experienced? I think it’s important first to acknowledge the inescapability of white supremacy and the ways in which I benefit from it even as I seek to undo or disrupt it through this research; I will never be able to completely set aside this mindset. However, as Linda Alcoff (1991, p. 26) contends in “The Problem of Speaking for Others”:

In order to evaluate attempts to speak for others in particular instances, we need to analyze the probable or actual effects of the words on the discursive and material context. One cannot simply look at the location of the speaker or her credentials to speak, nor can one look merely at the propositional content of the speech; one must also look at where the speech goes and what it does there.

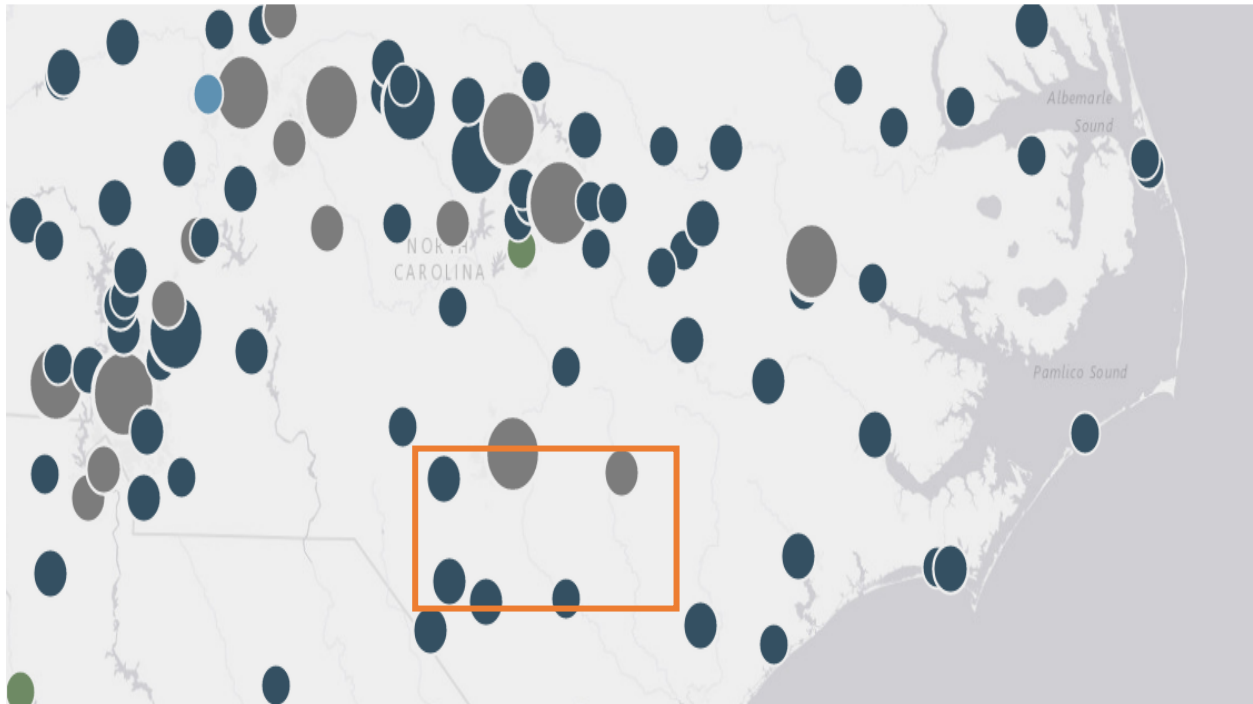
I would be remiss if I did not also acknowledge the extraordinary circumstances and events that took place during 2020-2021, many of which were/are not only harrowing, but lifted the veil to expose the enormous sham that is American capitalism. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, which by now has claimed over 500,000 lives in America alone, and all of the mental health and material challenges that have arisen throughout. Millions of people desperately waited on survival checks as our supposedly separate political parties . On May 5th, 2020, George Floyd was murdered by a police officer who knelt on his neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds. This abhorrent tragedy sparked multiscalar protests across the country, including in Fayetteville, North Carolina, the largest city in this study area and indicated in Figure 3 below. One can see how, in Figure 2 below, a Black Lives Matter motif located at Fayetteville's Market House that was commissioned after the murder of George Floyd is being defaced by white paint. It was also a year in which, by July 2020, the totals for trans people murdered had already surpassed 2019 totals (NCTE, 2020). It was a year that witnessed the amassing of right-wing militia groups before, during, and most notably, after the election when white nationalists stormed the Capitol Building on 6 January 2021. All of this environmental context was in the foreground of the qualitative interview sessions conducted during the summer of 2020.



Figure 2-The Market House—a former slave auction site—in Fayetteville. Video still depicts Black Lives Matter motif being defaced with white paint.



ACLED
Bringing clarity to crisis



EVENT DATE:
From: 26/02/2020 To: 26/02/2021

EVENT TYPE:
Battles
Violence against civilians
Explosions/Remote violence
Riots
Protests
Strategic developments

REGION:
Central America
Mexico
North America

Point Layer

- Battles
- Violence against civilians
- Explosions/Remote violence
- Riots
- Protests
- Strategic developments
- Multiple event types

Figure 3-Protest activity in and around the Fort Bragg region, April-October 2020 from ACLED, 2020

So, while striving to bear that in mind and check my own biases that come with the ways in which I benefit from white privilege, my positionality also enables a unique viewpoint from which to name aspects of the queer experience unique to this region. How my race and class have been my “ins,” or at least, reprieves from harassment amongst the white, Southern townies that were largely a part of my childhood experience in church and in school. However, how my queerness was also most assuredly the reason for ostracization in specifically cishet-coded spaces and settings where there was (alleged) racial harmony but in which homophobia and other forms of abuse against queer people was deemed acceptable.

Having been raised in the context of military family life, I was privy to the vast network of material, emotional, and community support afforded to military families. As an employee of a retail enterprise with a location on Fort Bragg, I worked for a number of years with military clientele. This familiarity has been instructive in numerous ways, but as my own consciousness has been raised, so too there have been consequences. In my experience, questioning the supremacy of the American military as an institution of valor and protection, as a strengthener of country, community, family, and faith has been viewed with disbelief, suspicion, and hostility, especially in the Fort Bragg region. And so, this culmination of positionality and lived experience led me to pursue this research because I knew that, even if my experience was unique solely to me, that other queer people of this region needed to be heard.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE

This literature employs an interdisciplinary perspective by drawing on three main literature groupings: queer geographies with an associated queer of color critique (Ferguson, 2015); digital geographies and virtual community/identity formation; and geographies of militarism and the military town.

Queer Geographies, Queer Sense of Place, Queer of Color Critique

Much of the literature on queerness and place has tended towards urban queer contexts (Levine, 1977; Bell and Valentine, 1995; Mort and Nead, 1999; Hubbard, 2000; Schweighofer, 2016). These urban queer spaces like the West Village, in New York, the Gayborhood in Philadelphia, or the Castro, in San Francisco had concentrations of bars, cafes, retail establishments, bathhouses, and social services that catered to queer clientele. In contrast, the Fort Bragg region is not known as a Queer Mecca, and for good reason: there are so few queer spaces in the region and what little that exist are vastly divergent than the Gayborhoods we have been socialized to believe are the prototypical queer dwelling places. Amin Ghaziani (2014) highlights how sexual cultures remain analytically observable through institutional landmarks (i.e., the Stonewall Inn, the piers on Christopher Street, etc) and anchors in “Measuring Urban Sexual Cultures.” He contends that “an assimilation of lesbians and gay men into the mainstream motivates many of them to mute their differences from heterosexuals,” (p. 381). In so doing, they contribute to a devolution of community; if the dominant culture becomes “tolerant” of these differences, there is less urgency to congregate in exclusively queer spaces. The history of gay urban enclaves, colloquially known as gayborhoods, geographical areas where queer people made place, found refuge from the violence of heteronormative society, and harnessed political power and agency.

However, in the pursuit of queer geographies, insomuch as within the larger gay rights movement, deference has been given to the histories of white, cisgender, gay men despite the fact that transgender women of color like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera were at the forefront of sexual liberation (Brockell, 2019). Nevertheless, racism, sexism, and classism pervaded the formation of these queer spaces, which themselves were often formed through the gentrification of black and brown neighborhoods. While the history of these spaces is fraught with negative connotations, the idea of a corporeal hyper concentration of queer-themed establishments has undeniable merit. Not just because representation matters, although of course, it certainly does. Rather, as Jeffrey Escoffier asserts in *American Homo: Community and Perversity*, “the visible existence of lesbian and gay communities is an important bulwark against the tide of reaction. The economic vitality of contemporary lesbian and gay communities erodes conservatives’ ability to revive the closet,” (Escoffier, 2018, p. 78). This is a legacy of exclusion that must be reckoned with, particularly because, in a similar fashion, we see these homonormative logics and tensions at play in what little queer spaces exist in the Fort Bragg region.

In the 1970’s, urban sociologist Martin Levine’s scholarship on so-called “gay ghettos” attempted to define and map out queer space. He posited that an area can be termed as such if it meets certain criterion, namely “gay institutions in number, a conspicuous and locally dominant gay subculture that is socially isolated from the larger community, and a residential population that is substantially gay,” (Levine, 1977). While this scholarship was prefaced as focusing solely on gay men, there remained glaring absences of non-white participants and a virtual lack of race analysis. The whitewashing of queer history and activism was compounded by the gentrification of Black and Brown neighborhoods by affluent white gay men and the exclusion of queer people of color from the queer spaces that ensued. Throughout the 1980’s/90’s, tensions between white queer communities and queer communities of color continued to erupt, particularly as it related to HIV/AIDS activism and the failures of the white queer community to integrate intersectional frameworks. This was also a time of creative proliferation in queer communities of color,

particularly the Black queer community, where scholars, poets, and performers generated moving and timeless work even as AIDS was rapidly thinning the ranks. Three anthologies were instrumental in situating that exact context: Michael J. Smith's (1983) *Black Men/White Men: A Gay Anthology*. Joseph Beam's (1986) *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*; and its companion, Essex Hemphill's (1991) *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, which was conceived by Beam and edited/completed by Hemphill following the former's 1987 death from complications of AIDS. Through short stories, essays, and poetry, these seminal works name the collective pain and rage felt by all queer people during the onset of HIV/AIDS, as well as the exclusion Black queer people endured from both the white queer community and the larger Black community. Further, they elicit an ongoing warning against the pitfalls of whitewashed solutions to community formation and solidarity and remain heartwarming and *heartbreaking* testaments to what it means to move about in this world as Black and queer.

Queer of Color critique demands that scholars account for the shortcomings of white queer literature, and in this case, queer geographies, that fail to answer for the lived experiences of racially and economically marginalized queer people. Scholars like Cathy Cohen (1997) have long decried the absence of an intersectional framework within mainstream queer thought. In the celebrated "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" Cohen explained her reaction to men of color leaving the board of Gay Men's Health Crisis--one of the oldest AIDS organizations in the country--due to racism.

But just as disturbingly it also highlights the limits of a lesbian and gay political agenda based on a civil rights strategy, where assimilation into, and replication of, dominant institutions are the goals. Many of us continue to search for a new political direction and agenda, one that does not focus on integration into dominant structures but instead seeks to transform the basic fabric and hierarchies that allow systems of oppression to persist and operate efficiently, (437) .

Because of the lack of intersectionality or focus on forging coalitions across multiple identities in the aim of tackling all forms of inequality, she contends that radical queer politics remains yet to

be actualized. Embracing a queer class analysis means acknowledging how exploitative economic relationships impact *all* working-class people. Thus viewed, the affluent, white, cisgender gay men who did/do dominate queer activism must divorce themselves from the mindset of material independence, which “allows them to disregard historically or culturally recognized categories,” and indeed, inculcates them from threats synonymous with query poverty (p. 450). Similarly, in *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Roderick Ferguson (2004) contends that

we need a study of racial formations that will not oblige heteropatriarchy, an analysis of sexuality not severed from race and material relations, an interrogating of African-American culture that keeps company with other racial formations, and an American Studies not beguiled by the United States, (p. 27).

Ferguson expands on material relations by encouraging us to consider how capital enables configurations of exclusion, particularly in regard to citizenship, who belongs.

As the state justifies property through this presumed universality, through claims about access, equivalence, rights, and humanity, capital contradicts that universality by enabling social formations marked by intersection particularities of race, genders, class, and sexuality, (p. 12).

Thus viewed, *Queer of Color Critique* is therefore essential for catechizing how white queer theory and white-washed queer politics have unsuccessfully been able to incorporate a praxis capable of serving non-white, non-cisgender, and working-class queer people. This research will use these frameworks to assess the rhetoric and policy of queer civil society at the regional and local scales to determine its efficacy in promoting horizontal activism that can be accessed by all queer people. Further, these texts will be instrumental for clarifying how queer social reproduction is affected by the presence of cultural conservatism and the defense economy.

Growing up queer in a rural setting there exists the implication that one will relocate to an urban setting as soon as it is feasible to do so. However, as evidenced by the recent scholarship of Latoya Eaves (2017) and Miriam Abelson (2016), among others, carving out space in suburban and rural locales is a process that has been overshadowed by urban queer geographies. That is not to say that these texts and oral histories uniform in their assessment of the hospitableness of rural spaces for queer people. Manalansan, Nadeau, Rodriquez, and Sommerville (2014) have done very important work in surveying the ways in which queer approaches can be applied to regions—in this case, the Midwest—as both a material space and a discursive construct. They reinforce the importance of recognizing who gets to be incarcerated, sequestered, isolated, and who gets to escape the rural, the urban (Manalansan, et al, 2014). When yet another element, that of the Southern, is brought into the equation, it can even serve to supersede aspects of urbanity or rurality. As evidenced by scholarship on quasi-urban queer spaces by Kevin Shields (2017) , through encounters with friends and strangers alike, Kentucky living and queerness were seen to be incompatible. He observed that “...more importantly and more vividly, whether we were from Alabama, Kentucky, or the Carolinas, we were viewed as rural. Our social identification with cities in our home state had nothing to do with the way we were categorized on the continuum of rurality to urbanity,” (p. 6).

Clearly, there is an external conception by queer people not of the South that the region is synonymous with rurality; similarly, an internal perception of queerness is harbored by Southerners like Kevin’s [unnamed] friend who openly scoffed at the idea of “so many gays” living in Kentucky,” (Shields, 2017). However, findings indicate that queer people in rural communities function best when they identify with and/or are perceived to be the status quo (cisgender, heterosexual, white). Abelson (2016) contends that “some trans men can gain enough acceptance to live relatively peacefully by making claims to sameness in rural places. This sameness relies on shared rural cultural values and lifestyle, rural masculinities, and whiteness. Certainly, men who could not claim sameness in these ways – such as men of color – avoided rural spaces altogether,” (1539). Given the tendencies within queer studies to eschew race and

class, and the lingering feelings in certain pockets of geography that would distinguish queer geographies as avant-garde, these existing ideas about other-than-urban queer spaces are necessary to analyze the intersections of geographies of queerness *and* race in the American South.

Increasingly, however, geographers have illuminated geographies of race, sexuality, and class in rural locales such as queer Appalachia, where Mathias Detamore (2010) explored how rural sexual and gender minorities have been neglected by the neoliberal gay project and the queer privilege afford to urban queer life. Through her fieldwork, Eaves (2017) found otherwise “tolerant” locales in which same-sex culture was relatively accepted continue to have decidedly ignorant conceptualizations of race. One of the participants in Eaves’ research, a queer Black woman named Rebecca, recounted the audacity of lifelong Appalachian residents who openly remarked to her that the only Black people they had seen were those who appeared on *Maurry* (89). This is but one insight into the double-bind that queer people of color experience in rural areas, caught between the racism and homonormativity of white straights and queers alike. These texts alongside a queer of color critique (discussed in the later section) will enable a critical examination of the ways in which queer geographies are spatially constituted by race, gender, class, and nationalist logics in the Fort Bragg Region (Puar, 2007; Ferguson, 2015).

In “Disrupting Cultural Selves: Constructing Gay and Lesbian Identities in Rural Locales,” Emily Kayzak’s (2011) participants often distinguish between urban gays and rural gays, and by extension, differing ways of life and queer expression. One of the noticeable aspects of this analysis is the binary it erects. And while many participants spoke to aspects of queer culture that were more common and/or only possible in urban locales, such as clubs, bars, and bookstores, none delineated their overall lifestyles along the urban-rural binary per se. However, many of the sentiments expressed by those rural queers who considered themselves *distinct* from the gay pride flag flying crowd were either echoed or alluded to by participants in my research. For

example, while Philip's experience, (38, African-American, cisgender) has been compounded by racism, both in the larger Fort Bragg region as well as within the queer community there, he said he has not experienced homophobia because most people assume he is straight. However, as indicated in an excerpt from Philip's interview included later in the text, even outright homophobic microaggressions in the workplace can be viewed as superfluous.

An assertion made by Kayzak (2011) that participants linked their identity as a local to their own understandings of why their sexuality was accepted certainly resonated with what many participants revealed about a whole host of issues; from the makeup of queer (or not) bars to success on dating apps to workplace dynamics. Further, for many, acceptance is often contingent on how "out and proud" they are, something that several of the participants in Kayzak's research used as a barometer to distinguish themselves from urban queer worldviews. Indeed, one white woman in her mid-fifties was even frustrated at the displays of queer expression at pride events where people can be "so extreme," (Kayzak, p. 570). Kayzak notes that these "extreme" people are the antithesis of many of her rural queer participants, but I would like to go a step further by focusing on this idea of extreme and connecting it to a prevailing theme in this work, which is that of palatability. The implication of extreme in Kayzak's work, to me, represents that which is unacceptable and unsuitable and unfit for the rural setting—this internalization/regurgitation of ideas about who belongs in certain spaces will present itself again in both similar and divergent forms throughout this (and future) work on the region.

John Howard's (2007) "Of Closets and Other Rural Voids" takes a number of pointed stances, some of which aligned with those of my participants, others not as much or not at all. For example, he repudiates contemporary (at that time—2007) content from MTV's *Logo* underscoring the perceived "mundane, everyday trade-offs for rural couples: fewer public displays of affection, a greater feeling of rootedness, less pride in outness, *more* of a sense of safety" (Howard, 2007, p. 101). Unfortunately, there seems to be a marked disconnect, at best, an

obliviousness, to the characterization of PDA, community, and safety as mundane. These are aspects of everyday life that many cis het couples would not dream of refraining from in a public setting, yet they are completely out of the question for the majority of the queer community here, so it's actually a common and distressing dynamic in our lives, however dull and commonplace it has become for him.

In the Fort Bragg region, a number of these so-called everyday trade-offs were on the minds of participants, and of course, one of the primary concerns of this study is the *everyday* queer geographies of this area. Unlike queer people of urban queer spaces, these everyday experiences of queer people in the Fort Bragg region have never been comprehensively documented, and not only the willingness, but the energy and enthusiasm of the participants to share their day-to-day *in the life* is partially because they believe strongly that they, we, have a right to share our truths. Often, it is in daily routines, the mundane actions that people with straight privilege and/or cis privilege partake in with entitled gusto, that a queer person might experience the most otherizing, perhaps even harassment or violence. An aversion to PDA was certainly a new experience for Chris (51, white, cisgender of Hope Mills—Cumberland County) particularly after living most of his life as a former Straight-to-the-World career soldier. The impacts of leaving that plane and living his life openly as a queer, polyamorous man in the Fort Bragg region has meant an introduction to new challenges that are often quite jarring:

“Just walking out in town I'm not wearing, you know, an AOC Pride shirt [a reference to an earlier point in the conversation in which I told him of wearing the moniker of the progressive congresswoman while voting for Bernie Sanders during the 2020 Democratic Primary] or anything like that. No one... there's nothing to identify me sexually, anyway. Anyway, we were at a bar, and we were sitting there talking, and you know I'm older, I'm 52, so I have less fucks to give. I guess that's part of it. But I put my hand on his hand, to hold his hand, but he withdrew it, and it wasn't like PDA in uniform kind of thing, you know, which is prohibited with females

or anybody else it was just...just that realization hey man, you know, I've been doing this for a while, this is my life you know, and this is not good, this could cause trouble for us, you know. So I don't do this. He's openly gay with his family and all that too, but the whole PDA thing made him very nervous, you know. Yeah, that's really one of the few occasions I can think of where I might have made myself... it was potentially, I could have made myself a target... or you know, of at least stares or disapproval from the public or whatever, you know.”

Which is related to what is perhaps the least applicable of all Howard's aforementioned trade-offs; the pronounced sense of safety in rural environments. Rural and semi-rural locales in the Fort Bragg region can be just as threatening, perhaps even more so, especially for those with overlapping oppressions in areas where differences and different cultures aren't always celebrated. Three Spanish-speaking participants, Javi (29, Puerto-Rican-Latino, cisgender) Val (31, Mexican-American, nonbinary), and Ashley (31, Indigenous-Taino, cisgender) all spoke of an awareness of the potentiality of confrontation for speaking Spanish in public. Ashley was vehement in expressing that “existing as anything ‘Other’ is risky, like existing as a Hispanic woman I barely speak Spanish out and about because I have to think, ok, who's around me, who's listening.” This shows that for some, rather than a sense of safety, existing as queer in this environment can include a feeling of being surveilled, of unease. Because of this, covering and/or passing have been and can still be useful survival tools for queer people in a range of (often hostile) settings. Concern over how we pass as queer people is certainly not a new debate, but a longstanding discussion in the queer lexicon. More recently, passing has been given new exposure in the cultural zeitgeist through content like *Pose*, which has created discussion about the merits of passing as a goal and a standard. While relevant in many respects, the knowledge we gain about these trans and queer experiences from *Pose* and its New York backdrop do not quite encapsulate the experiences of the Fort Bragg region. As formerly, research like Abelson's on trans quality of life in rural settings shows that acceptance is often contingent on not being identifiable as transgender in most cases; in other words, passing as “believably” man or woman.

This issue will be explored further in the analysis of the regional culture and the controls it establishes on queer expression, identity, and space, both physical and digital.

Digital geographies

As a subfield of geography, digital geographies in the broadest sense is concerned with the relationship between the material world and the digital world. The development of smartphones and their applications have redefined the way we play with interactive games like Pokémon Go! (a personal favorite of mine and my partner's 5 year-old son) that uses GPS to locate wild Pokémon to capture. In addition to gaming, these GPS-based applications have revolutionized the way we communicate, including hookup and date. This is no different in the queer community and is particularly crucial in this study area. In "Digital Turn, Digital Geographies?" Ash, Kitchin, and Leszczynski (2018) characterize a geographic turn to the digital, which is characterized by "binary computing architectures; the genre of socio- techno-cultural productions, artefacts, and orderings of everyday life that result from our spatial engagement with digital mediums; and the logics that both structure these ordering practices as well as their effects. To this we add a fourth dimension, that of digital discourses which actively promote, enable, secure, and materially sustain the increasing reach of digital technologies," (26). The pervasiveness of digital technologies provides a unique yet suitable challenge to geographers whose concern with spatial phenomena must also incorporate an epistemological, ontological, and methodological openness in their engagements with the digital," (38). Similarly, Elwood and Leszczynski (2018) are also concerned with the implications of burgeoning developments in digital geographies in "Feminist Digital Geographies." They contend that "staying with the trouble means attending to and unpacking how people make sense and meaning of data and technologies in the spaces and practices of their everyday lives, how they grapple with the effects and consequences of a digital society, and how these effects and consequences manifest differently across spaces and subject/ivities," (640). These critical approaches to digital

geographies can further articulate sentiments expressed by participants who relayed their various experiences in these digital spaces.

In the absence of queer infrastructure in rural places, digital geographies of various expressions have been instrumental in forming queer relationships and networks. As formerly, literature examining how the spatial relationships between these apps and their users in military communities is lacking, but inferences can be made regarding the perpetuation of certain stereotypes about gender and sexuality. These apps are a useful tool of analysis through which to view queer identity and community within military landscapes. Digital spaces like Grindr can reproduce and regulate masculinities along with tropes about gender and sexuality, which begs the question of whether harmful stereotypes are more prevalent in military-dominated spaces or in any other space where heteronormative tropes can be anticipated (Bonner-Thompson, 2017). While some apps like Tinder allow for the option of some thirty-seven gender selections, others like Grindr not only significantly narrow one's gender selections but force them to ascribe to "male" or "female" selections upon account activation. Thus, sexual and gender hierarchies remain entrenched in the digital. If adherence to these norms is especially prominent amongst users with military affiliation it would reinforce the presupposition that they exist externally and/or in opposition to the queer community by constituting spaces as heteronormative and thus a challenge to queer space (Mearns, 2019).

Even so, these digital geographies have a way of promoting hybridization between the digital and the socio-sexual geographies that collapse visual and physical space (Miles, 2019). What is most useful about Miles' work is the categorization of certain types of app users—timewaster, embracer, minimalist, etc—and how the traits associated with each category inform their queer experiences. To be sure, these categories are by no means binding, rather they are quite permeable, but their rigidity is of less consequence than how the apps themselves provide a sort of conveyor belt through which a range of queer expressions can be interpreted. However, despite the utility of Miles and others who have explored queer geographies in a digital context, there remains a trend in queer theory and queer research--whether overtly or inadvertently—that

centers whiteness and white experiences as the default queer experience. This research has surveyed (but by no means exhausted) how social relations within queer communities are related to external hierarchies beyond them and how in turn these manifest in the digital realm.

Geographies of Militarism & the Military Town

Sheppard and Tyner (2016)'s introduction in the Forum on Geography and Militarism telescopes the working relationship between geography and militarism and draws on the collected essays of two special sessions of the 2014 American Association of Geographers meeting to assess the *implications* of that relationship. Throughout the twentieth century especially, the shifting balance of power in Europe meant that shrewd geopolitical views were an asset to gain or retain the military edge, particularly in World Wars. These days, we see the ties to the military industrial complex through its development of GPS software, GIS software, and various topographical modeling software, all of which can and has been used to police American citizens as well as hunt down those without documents. Although brief, this introduction asserts not only that “geographers located within the nonmilitary academy have failed to reflect adequately on the implications of these entanglements with militarism for geography as an academic discipline,” but that the discipline needs to reorient itself toward geographies of peace (505).

While a trajectory of the relationship between militarism and geography was indisputably useful, there were not many scholarly sources pertaining specifically to this region as a military town, and specifically, the *cultural* implications couched in that geography. One of the most integral monographs was *Homefront: A Military City and the American 20th Century*, in which Catherine Lutz (2001) paints a portrait of military cities like Fayetteville as “both a city of cosmopolitan substance and humane striving and the dumping ground for the problems of the American century of war and empire, the corner of the American house where the wounds of war have

pierced most deeply and are most visible,” (4). To residents, Fayetteville is colloquially referred to as Fayetteville, both because of the obvious proliferation of soldiers, but also because the city is viewed by some as akin to a war zone. Lutz’s critique on militarism as having shifted “from a nation suspicious of standing armies to one whose military patrols the globe in all of its corners, twenty four hours each day,” is one that can scarcely be heard elsewhere in this region (9).

Homefront was a text that, although written by an outsider, and without a queer lens to speak of, wonderfully captured much of what it means to live within the context of this region.

As evidenced through the works of Jasbir Puar (2007) through selected chapters from *Terrorist Assemblages*, such as “Homonationalism and Biopolitics” and “The Sexuality of Terrorism,” there are multiple layers to dissect when attempting to penetrate these worldviews. Similarly, Anna Agathangelou, M. Daniel Bassichis, and Tamara L. Spira’s “Intimate Investments: Homonormativity, Global Lockdown, and the Seductions of Empire,” as well as Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade’s “Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We’ve Got” in particular further direct us to recognize how mainstream LGBT rights groups often shortchange queer activism in favor of these placebo rights and the remedies needed to forge coalitions across multiple axes of oppression. Hence, a queer of color critique is well-placed to make sense of these misplaced platitudes and sense of complacency because it is constantly challenging how these formations of empire and securitization play out across the axes of sexuality, race, gender, and class. Another aim of this paper seeks to address these questions: What are the visible expressions of homonationalism, homonormativity, pinkwashing, and seductions of empire in this region? If queer people and organizations are being featured and promoted, who/which are they, and why? For the groups that do exist, is their ministry intersectional?

Put differently, how has the pervasiveness of military culture in Fort Bragg and the surrounding communities contributed to the inclusion of previously excluded bodies in what Agathangelou et

al describe as the “seductions of empire,” (Agathangelou, et al, 2008, p. 120). Throughout their thought-provoking text is an urgent reminder that mainstream LGBT groups are ultimately only prioritizing *certain civil rights*, such as inclusivity in institutions like marriage and the military. In so doing, the abject realities of increased privatization of the prison apparatus and the policing of Black and Brown bodies are obfuscated. These actions understandably widen the chasm between mainstream LGBT organizations that center what are essentially white issues and everyone else who cannot, *will not* fit into the homonormative box seen as acceptable to dominant zeitgeist. Aside from the irksome realization that is concomitant with the fact that Black and Brown queer people were instrumental to the victories of queer rights, there are larger, global implications to the misguided priorities of white-centered queer rights movements. While queer communities across the United States are certainly not monolithic, a survey of queer life in *this* Southern, rural, military locale could well be a microcosm in the larger settings of queer communities that mirror these qualifications.

In other words, research outside of Camp Lejeune in Jacksonville, North Carolina, Fort Benning, Georgia, and many more besides should also be undertaken to assess these claims, if it is not being done so already. Never before has the inculcation of other-than-heterosexualities ever been anything *but* a pejorative in relation to the American military, and this reversal of fortunes is a relatively recent phenomenon. The example of the Human Rights Campaign advertisement featuring the gentleman whose partner was killed in the September 11th attacks was used to illustrate how fears of terrorism were used to rope acceptable queerness into a capitalist and militaristic narrative. Through his clean-cut image of white domesticity and economic productivity, the gentleman’s tragedy is used to propagate enemy production; brown terrorists and enemies of the United States seek to disrupt our American way of life, gay or straight (Ibid). The rapid mobilization of the military apparatus beginning in the early 2000’s was predicated on a nationalistic zeal, certainly, but it also needed to incorporate previously excluded actors to shore up the increased militarization. In this way, manifestations of sexual exceptionalism become apparent because, as Puar continues

“...they do not necessarily contradict or undermine heterosexual sexual exceptionalism; in actuality it may support forms of heteronormativity and the class, racial, and citizenship privileges they require. The historical and contemporaneous production of an emergent normativity, *homonormativity*, ties the recognition of homosexual subjects, both legally and representationally, to the national and transnational political agendas of U.S. imperialism.” (p. 9)[emphasis added].

Using this lens of homonormativity, one can begin to discern the interstices that form as a result of only focusing on sexuality and forgoing critical analyses of sexuality *in conjunction with* race, class, and gender analyses.

Specifically, these homonormative reorientations in *America* that are predicated on certain rights being afforded to queer communities means a doubling down of (and willful complacency in) a *global* imperialist system. How does this relate to Fort Bragg and its surrounding communities? To be sure, if there are linkages between a homonormative, America-first worldview, then it would be reified in organizations claiming to cater to queer people and queer issues. What are the various organizations that come to mind when one thinks of queer outreach? PFLAG? HIV/AIDS shelters, homeless shelters specifically aimed at queer demographics? What about nursing homes and other convalescence initiatives? Support groups for the unique challenges faced by trans residents? If the quest for civil rights is over and the gays have been liberated, as has been posited by right wing gay pundits like James Kirchick in pieces dubiously titled “Gay Rights Have Already Been Won,” (Kirchick, 2019), one might still expect to encounter a litany of queer rights groups dotted across the landscape with a dwindling scope of responsibilities. If this were so, the environment of freshly liberated gays would retain some semblance of an existing infrastructure that catered to all facets of queer society based on their many and varied necessities. Of course, a third analysis would reflect that this infrastructure was never ubiquitous, and what did/does exist caters to a mentality whose be-all end-all is preoccupied with inclusion in the mechanisms that signify equality with a certain socio-economic class.

While worthy scholarship has been devoted to urban (and to a lesser extent, rural) queer geographies, there have not been significant inroads into the realities of rural queer geographies

within a militaristic socio-economic landscape. Critique on the neoliberal attitudes towards inclusion in American military institutions is the subject of *Against Equality*, a collection of queer, leftist anti-military literatures that enable us to detect and articulate the shadowy presence of militarism, and its familiar, imperialism. For many rational thinkers, the fact that queer people should be able to participate freely in these organizations is a moot point when considering the larger picture that is the destructiveness of the American war machine. However, mainstream neoliberal organizations like the Human Rights Commission often fail to even acknowledge some root problems with this inclusivity framework, namely, that “the military is a terrible place to seek inclusion...making it a slightly better place for LGBT people is of limited worth,” (Nair, et al, 2018).

How does this position reconcile with neoliberal attitudes who view the fight for “equality” as having been won? For decades, the calls for equality have been for inclusion in the institutions that run parallel to the capitalist socio-economic system, i.e., marriage, adoption rights, and acceptance in security industries like the military or the police. To that end, the questions of what it means to exist as a queer person and carve out queer space in these rural, southern counties saturated by military culture must be raised. If sexuality is a construct whose tendency “lies in organizing and inventing forms of sexual definition, categorization, and regulation,” (Weeks, 1980) does this mean the intensity of regulation is dictated by geography? To what end are these queer geographies subject to/informed by overlapping constraints in the form of rurality and militarism? The experiences that follow will validate existing scholarship while producing new modes of thinking about queer geographies.

CHAPTER III: STUDY AREA, METHODOLOGY, AND HINDRANCES

As much as possible, facets of the environmental, socio-political, economic, and constructed landscape will be named and interwoven throughout this thesis. However, I wanted to lead with a broad sense of the regional topography for readers unfamiliar with this region's geography. Although the four counties examined here may differ in terms of where they are situated among North Carolina's three major geographic regions (with Moore County in the Piedmont and the other three counties in the Coastal Plain), together, they are all part of the Sandhills physiographic region. This ecoregion is characterized by sandy soils, vast stretches of Longleaf Pine forests—indeed, one of the few remaining pockets of the once-abundant tree—are ubiquitous along many a rural road. Moving here at nine years old, they appeared to me as though they had been intentionally planted here, so neatly aligned as they appeared from my diminished perspective in the back of my parents vehicle. This piney essence is represented by cultural symbols of this region: in place names (Whispering Pines, Southern Pines); school names (Pinecrest High School, Pine Forest High School); the largest tribal presence in the region, the Lumbee, have long called themselves the People of the Pines.

Between the four counties, the most populous city is Fayetteville at around 210,000 inhabitants. Minor urban areas like the Pinehurst-Southern Pines region in Moore County have an estimated population of almost 101,000; in Robeson County, the city of Lumberton area has around 130,000 inhabitants. Suburban sprawl is common, with numerous strip malls, dollar stores, and convenience stores continuously being built to supplement the rapid increase of subdivisions and apartment complexes with large parking areas built along major arterials. To say this region is automobile-dependent would be an understatement; estimated percent of workers who drove to work falls well above 85% in each county, according to Census figures (PolicyMap, 2021). Predictably, there is little wide-scale public transportation infrastructure and many middle-class

families are multiple-car households. Further, people live in one of these counties, work in another; were born and raised in one, move next door for work. Commute to work in the university system; commute to shop. Therefore, rather than a strict county-by-county analysis, the stories of participants will be woven throughout so as to reflect the interconnectedness of life amongst these counties. This regional perspective will be put into conversation with preconceived notions about queer landscapes and the variables that contribute (or don't) to their abundance.

Methodologically, this research uses a qualitative, ethnographic, grounded-theory approach, drawing on interviews with 28 community members of this four-county region. Some were born there, raised there, and never left; others were raised there and had since relocated elsewhere; others were transplants to the region. Drawing on the ideas of women of color feminist praxis, their lived experiences were/are treated as situated knowledges in their own right and were used to assess the nature of queer space and community in and around Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The rhetoric and organizing praxis of community organizations like Sandhills Pride and Fayetteville Pride were analyzed to aid in gauging the strategies of constructing and maintaining a sense of queer place, and when possible, critique their methodology, policy platforms, and outreach. The semi-structured interviews took place virtually and mainly on weekends during the summer of 2020. To engender participation from queer people outside of my own social networks, apps and social media spaces like Tinder and Facebook were used as recruitment devices.

Methodologically, this was perhaps the most trying component of recruiting for numerous reasons. As with complementary apps like Bumble, Scruff, and Grindr, Tinder uses a GPS system that offers suggestions based on distance as well as whatever parameters users institute (sexual preference, gender identity, age range, etc). Living as I do in Carthage in Moore County, the location-based parameters of the app would therefore draw prospective matches from 50

miles (the maximum distance I set). The problem with this as a recruitment device for a specific region is that there is no way to specify a specific *region*, only a distance, and thus I would often match with individuals from the Raleigh or Charlotte M.S.A.'s if they did not otherwise have their location listed in their bio. While I did not experience the interactions notorious on apps like Grindr and Scruff (uninvited nude photos, slurs, etc), Tinder was also a trying method of communication in terms of sending required research documentation. In lieu of Covid-19 restrictions on research, the IRB office waived the signature requirement on consent forms, meaning the form need only be sent and explained to participants. There was no direct method of sending files on Tinder and asking (initially) interested strangers for their email unfortunately seemed to have scared off a number of potential interviewees.

As much as possible in the short period allotted for recruiting and interviewing, I strove to include voices across the spectrum in regard to race, gender identity, sexuality, age, and class. In terms of identifiers, names used are both real and pseudonyms, depending on how the participant wanted to identify. Further, the uses of, for example, “Black” and “African-American” when describing the participant fluctuate based on how they personally used them to identify themselves. I was also inspired by similar (and recent!) scholarship in digital queer geographies right here at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, such as the work of Eric Blane Toler in the Department of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. His thesis “Grindr-ing Respectability, Normativity, and the Abject Other” was not only insightful and inspirational because of its engagement with Grindr, but also because of his use of his own experiences as lived knowledge (Toler, 2020). Similarly, in the introduction to his groundbreaking work *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*, E. Patrick Johnson writes of self-reflexivity and how that meant “putting [his] own body on the line—that is, sharing [his] own history as a Black gay man born in the South,” (Johnson, 2008, p. 10). In the spirit of these works, I will include portions of my own narrative (that of a queer man, the son of a career servicemember, the product of a conservative United Methodist upbringing, coming of age in an amalgamation of Southern, religious, military-affiliated space) alongside that of my participants.

CHAPTER IV: “I COULD HAVE MADE MYSELF A TARGET”: REGIONAL CULTURAL CONSERVATISM, QUEER IDENTITY, QUEER EXPRESSION

While it might be tempting to assess the socio-political culture of this region using metrics from the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, we know that the reality of Trump’s ascendancy is a symptom of much deeper, more corrosive structural phenomena associated with late-stage capitalism, empire, and white supremacy at multiple scales (Davies, 2018). Here, conservatism is indicative of more than mere party affiliation; Trump carried only two of the four counties, Moore and Robeson, in both elections (Kommenda, et al, 2020). The Fort Bragg region is first and foremost a bastion of patriotism and, I would argue, patriotic correctness, or “the point where the troops are 100 percent unassailable, and a great number of bad actors are co-opting that unassailability...[which] results in any thoughtful critique of the military and its methods falling upon deaf ears,” (Magary, 2018). The narrative of America as the strongest, *freest* nation in the world is prevalent here, and it is the nation’s military that ensures the continuity of these freedoms. Nation forms one segment of a tripartite of values alongside Family and Faith. Chris (52, white, cisgender) maintained that “...there's still a big part of God and Country, as part of the military, a huge part, so there's still this Judeo-Christian influence that's probably stronger in the military than it is in the general population.”

He added that for the majority of those who enlist, God and Country ideals are “huge for them,” so much so that while not *every* enlistee touts these euphemisms, the culture of the military remains skewed that way, which is reinscribed in the wider regional culture. The work of Puar and others inspired me to assess whether local queer organizing reproduced, knowingly or otherwise, racist, classist, sexist, or *imperialist* logics. A way to examine this is through quintessential queer events like Pride; while there has been queer representation at wider regional events of decades past, the festival of 2018, one of three organized by Fayetteville PRIDE, marked the first Pride event as such, which, for this area is historic: full-stop. However, not everyone viewed these happenings as meaningful progress. Some participants, like Javier

(29, Puerto-Rican/Latino), have long been skeptical about the ability of queer organizations and events to flourish there in any context:

It's just super conservative regardless, so then I'm just going there to be shamed. I mean, it [referring to the Pride events held by the Market House on Hay Street in Downtown Fayetteville, a former slave auction site] used to be a slave center. You're going to have a parade at a slave square? That's fucked up. There's symbolism in everything.

Even the events we *do* have are held in venues in which the landscape itself is coded as (aggressively) heterosexual, (or aggressively white, aggressively affluent, etc) relegating non-heterosexual others to “specific (and often marginal) spaces because of fears of homophobic abuse and intolerance,” (Hubbard, 2000, p. 191). It's important to acknowledge the dichotomy presented here: no one is denying the sheer difficulty of establishing and maintaining a queer organization under the shadow of this cultural conservatism, and this was before the onset of COVID-19. However, it is more important to acknowledge the legacy of entrenched racism, the structures like the defense industry, like capitalism, whose existence is predicated on surplus populations, and the ways in which neoliberal activism bolsters these phenomenon. In the following subsections, I hope to further illuminate the many socio-cultural threads binding this region—and the queer community within this region—together.

Religion, Religiosity, and Place:

“Yea, they are not supposed to talk like that, anyway,” said my best friend after I recounted to her how the oral surgeon and his aides spontaneously prayed over me prior to administering the local anesthetic. I was reflecting on how this was not discussed at any point prior to my operation, and further, sprung upon me while I was in what I feel like was a compromising situation. I could hear my bestie shrug through my iPhone ear buds as she said, as if a matter of course: “We live in Jesus country though, so I hear it everywhere I go.”

Hard to argue with that. And it *does* seem to be everywhere one goes; it's not called the Bible Belt for nothing. And despite right-wing scare media content often screeching the contrary, affiliation with Christianity remains common enough that a medical practitioner with no prior relationship to a patient, medical or otherwise, felt comfortable enough praying over the patient without prior consent and/or knowledge of the patient's religious affiliation. A starting point is measuring religiosity and then, in conjunction with the lived experiences of participants, attempt to gauge its effect on the queer geographies of the region. In terms of available statistical data, there is no one succinct method of quantifying or qualifying the number, rate, intensity of adherence, with some methods being a bit hard to grasp. To elucidate, one can take a data set from an aggregator like Policy Map and determine the rate of adherence to all denominations and religious groups per 1,000 people. Variables include Rate, Adjusted Rate, Number, and Count, which can be viewed either at state or county scale using 2010 U.S. Census data. Given the figures for the counties at hand, one might not discern any notable coalescing of religious adherence, as indicated below in Figure 5 .

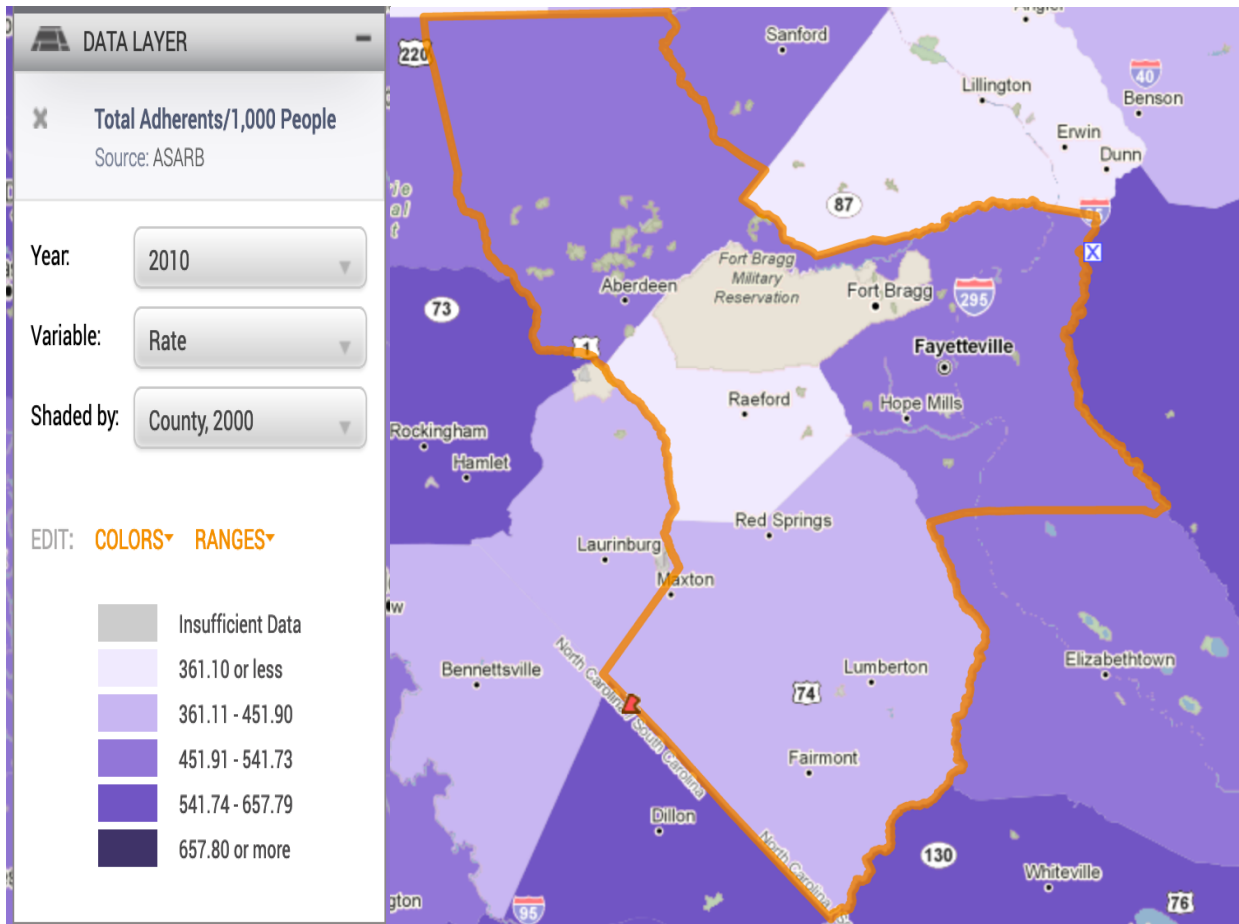


Figure 4-Total Religious Adherents per 1,000 People, from PolicyMap

Hoke reads surprisingly low at 361.10/1,000, followed by Robeson at 361.11-451.90/1,000; Cumberland and Moore each fell in the 451.91-541.73/1000 tier. How can we account for the countless stories of queer people living, for better or worse, amidst a sea of Christians? Alternately, one can opt to view data regarding the presence of individual denominations, like evangelical Protestantism. Again, while the counties of Cumberland, Moore, and Robeson fall under the second-highest tier (238.81-368.86/1,000 people), this still does not account for the reality of that pervasive religiousness.

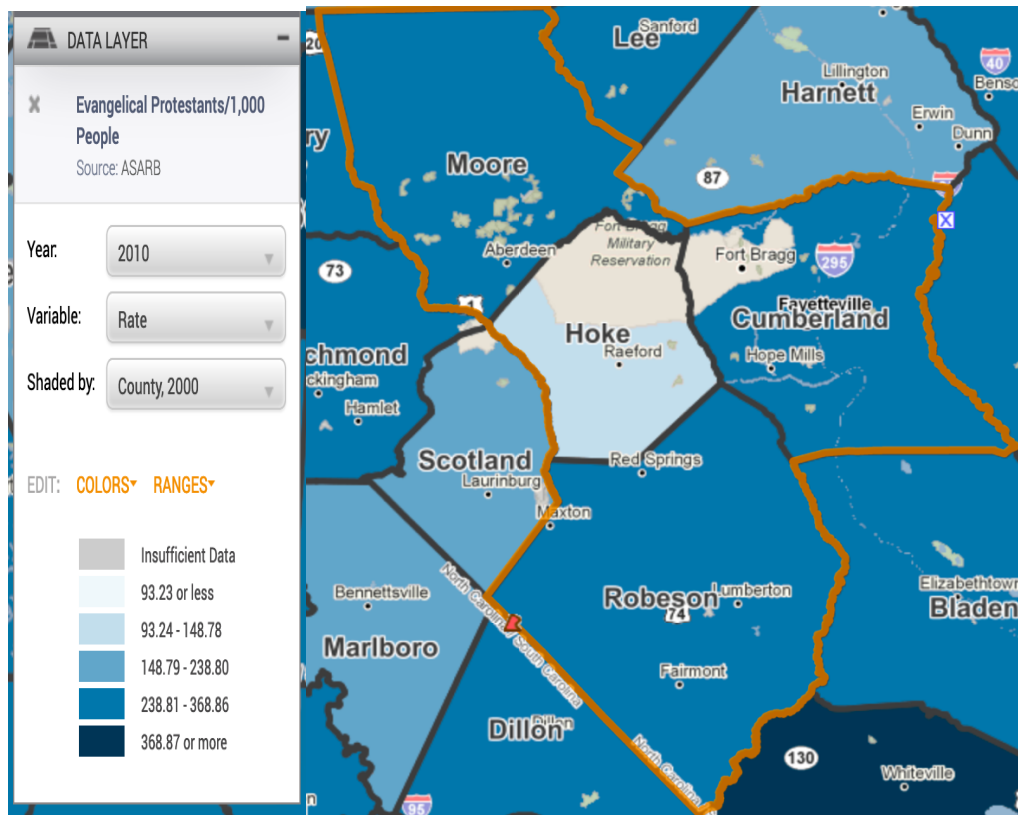


Figure 5-Rate of Adherence to Evangelical Protestantism per 1,000 People, from PolicyMap

In conversation with friend and mentor Dr. Jamie Mize, Assistant Professor in the Department of History at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, it was clear that this data did not reflect the lived realities of people of the region, particularly Robeson County, where much of the population identifies as American Indian and belong to an array of denominations, including Southern Baptist and Pentecostal churches. Understanding this led me to think of reasons why those voices were not represented in data collection. My good friend Hannah (22, Indigenous) reminded me that many Lumbee people especially harbor a mistrust of the government, which would include any census takers. This often stems from misrepresentation of Native Americans based on phenotypes; Native Americans might be coded as Black or white if the census worker was unable or unwilling to notate them otherwise. And this is when the census takers seek to include Native voices to begin with, which is also not always the case. Since the data does not paint a complete picture, it is necessary to then trace the deeper genealogies of religion and

religious influence in this region. To be sure, Christianity is deeply ingrained in the social fabric of the Fort Bragg region. While hard figures concerning the number of churches between the four counties were not readily available, I am confident that there are hundreds of churches. However, a plethora of religious adherents in and of itself does not necessarily indicate a hostile religiosity, does it? Churches have long been the centers of community for white Americans, and this region draws religious influence from a number of Christian (mostly Protestant) denominations. Moore County, for example, retains the influence of Highland Scots who descended from the backcountry of Pennsylvania and Virginia, who were largely Presbyterian; Cumberland County was formed from Bladen County by the British and the Anglican Church; and Robeson County's Native communities established their own churches prior to the colonists war with Britain in 1776. Hoke County was not incorporated until 1911, by which time, throughout the four-county region, one also encountered Southern Baptist, United Methodist, Catholic, and other previously unrepresented denominations (Wood, 2019).

For people of color, especially in the American South, churches have been focal points for organizing and agency during slavery, Jim Crow, and beyond. Celebrated historian of the American South Malinda Maynor-Lowry explained that for those whose existence in the region predates the United States of America, such as the Lumbee Tribe of Native Americans, Christianity was used to “support their kinship networks, their economic needs and aspirations, and their expressive outlets, especially music,” (Maynor-Lowry, 2018, p. 57). Further, of those participants who specifically named churches as places they would *avoid* as queer people, the majority were white, which suggests the ongoing importance of church for people of color in the American South, straight and queer alike. It also suggests an ongoing failure on the part of white Christianity to repair its relationship with white queer people. And indeed, there were a number of participants who were both openly queer and active in their churches, although some acknowledged that the “acceptance” of queer parishioners was sometimes conditional. Celine (21, Black, cisgender) said that while she didn't necessarily avoid church as a queer person, she conceded that she could see why other queer people did/do, especially those who are more open

about their sexuality and/or gender identity. The limits of queerness are often circumscribed because “the sin,” as it stands, is not condoned, meaning a person may be “welcome” in the sense that they can enter without harm or abuse, but certainly never embraced to the fullest extent of their queer selves. Jared (21, Indigenous, cisgender) acknowledged that the preacher at his church has given what he described as “Hellfire and brimstone” sermons on homosexuality in the past knowing full well that queer people were in the congregation. While this has not transpired since, incidents like these personify how queer people often feel otherized in religious spaces.

For others, sometimes carving out space and living one’s truth as an unabashed queer person in church means walking proudly, but keeping it moving. For example, Michael (61, African-American, cisgender) described his policy of “keeping it cute” with his fellow parishioners like so:

None of them have ever been to my house, I've never been to any of their houses. When church is over I'm not standing on the church grounds talking to you and another and if you don't speak to me between where I'm at in the church and on my way to my car, we don't talk (both of us laugh), so.

This enables him to practice his faith but also keep potentially homophobic congregants at arm’s length. Unfortunately, there are church doors that remain unequivocally shut to queer people in this region. Another participant, Tyler, (23, white, cisgender) was cast out of his Southern Baptist congregation altogether after they arrived on his doorstep to “inquire” (that is, attempt to discipline and control) about his sexuality. And to reiterate, Tyler was but one of many white Christians/Christian-raised participants who spoke of ongoing issues with the church.

To be sure, Christianity dominates the region, but there are other faith communities, though much less visible and certainly not invoked in the same way. And while there are a handful of

Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu congregations in the region, regrettably, I was not able to connect with any queer people of these religions. In the future, particularly my dissertation journey, I will strive to work more closely with these communities. As it stands presently, the participants who imparted their various experiences negotiating queerness and Christianity in the Fort Bragg Region clarified the contemporary dynamics of this age-old binary that dictated one could either remain closeted--to remain in their church-- or come out—and risk getting kicked out. We see continuity in two respects, one being that participation in church life remains prominent in the lives of queer people of color. Yet, in the sense that rurality and rural church mentality can be synonymous with hostility towards queer people, there was continuity of that historic tension. However, church-going participants often defied this binary by continuing to go despite expressions of anti-queerness or an overall sense of being “Other.”

Thus viewed, this regional cultural conservatism is partially rendered through religiosity, one which was grafted onto the landscape as a product of Euro-American colonization, with its imported values of whiteness/white Christianity and the racialized, gendered, and sexual norms inherent therein. Another branch of this regional culture is informed by the more recent, but no less insidious, imprinting of military culture and military values. A military culture that continues to engorge itself via the propagation of what Puar calls “the terrorist as a queer, nonnational, perversely racialized other [that] has become part of the normative script of the U.S. war on terror” (Puar, 2007, p. 37). Already we see this amongst many prominent queer intellectuals both nationally and locally whose elation over President Biden’s removal of Trump’s ban on transgender service members supersedes the larger concerns over the consolidation of empire implicit in these struggles for equality. It is within this context that we can also locate the undercurrents of militarism, white supremacy, and patriotic correctness and how they destabilize all but the most moderate queer bodies (both metaphysical and corporeal).

The Dynamics of Militarism, White Supremacy, and Patriotic Correctness

In public conversations, gays unfailingly draw upon the narrow and patriarchal discourse of the nation-state and the glory of war, as if these were righteous and just and pure. We wonder if they have shut their ears to the rising tide of anti-war sentiment across the world. We wonder if they do not see the burnt remnants of entire cities decimated in the thirst for oil, or the corpses of adults and children deemed as ‘collateral damage’ as the United States continues its thunderous march towards a failed attempt at world domination. –Against Equality

Javier’s concerns about holding Pride events in the vicinity of a former slave auction site speaks to a larger issue about reconciling with America’s racist past as well as how institutional racism operates in the present, including ongoing tensions between mainstream queer organizing and racial obliviousness. In the Fort Bragg region, cities like Fayetteville experienced upheaval after the murder of George Floyd. A Black Lives Matter memorial around the Market House was defaced with white paint, and one Ronnie Long, local mechanic, white nationalist, and Confederate sympathizer, vowed that the “South would rise again” and he was “glad George Floyd was dead” in a now-deleted Facebook post (“What’s Up NC,” 2020). Unfortunately, as reassuring it would be if men like Ronnie Long were alone in their opinions, in their militancy, the data suggests otherwise. While America as a whole is known for its preoccupation with patriotism and exceptionalism, the heart of the so-called All-American Defense Corridor is conspicuously governed by the tenets of patriotic correctness. However, it’s also important to name how the Trump presidency has further emboldened white supremacist groups across the nation and thus increasing the chances for violent action. At the time of the ACLED study, scholars and activists have been researching the potential for right-wing violence post-election, and, for good reason, as we all know. A joint study conducted by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project and Militia Watch evidenced that the entire state of North Carolina was at moderate risk of militia activity before, during, and after the election, partially because of a history of neo-Confederate and paramilitary organization (ACLED & Militia Watch, 2020).

Activity of Militias and Armed Groups United States (24 May – 17 October 2020)

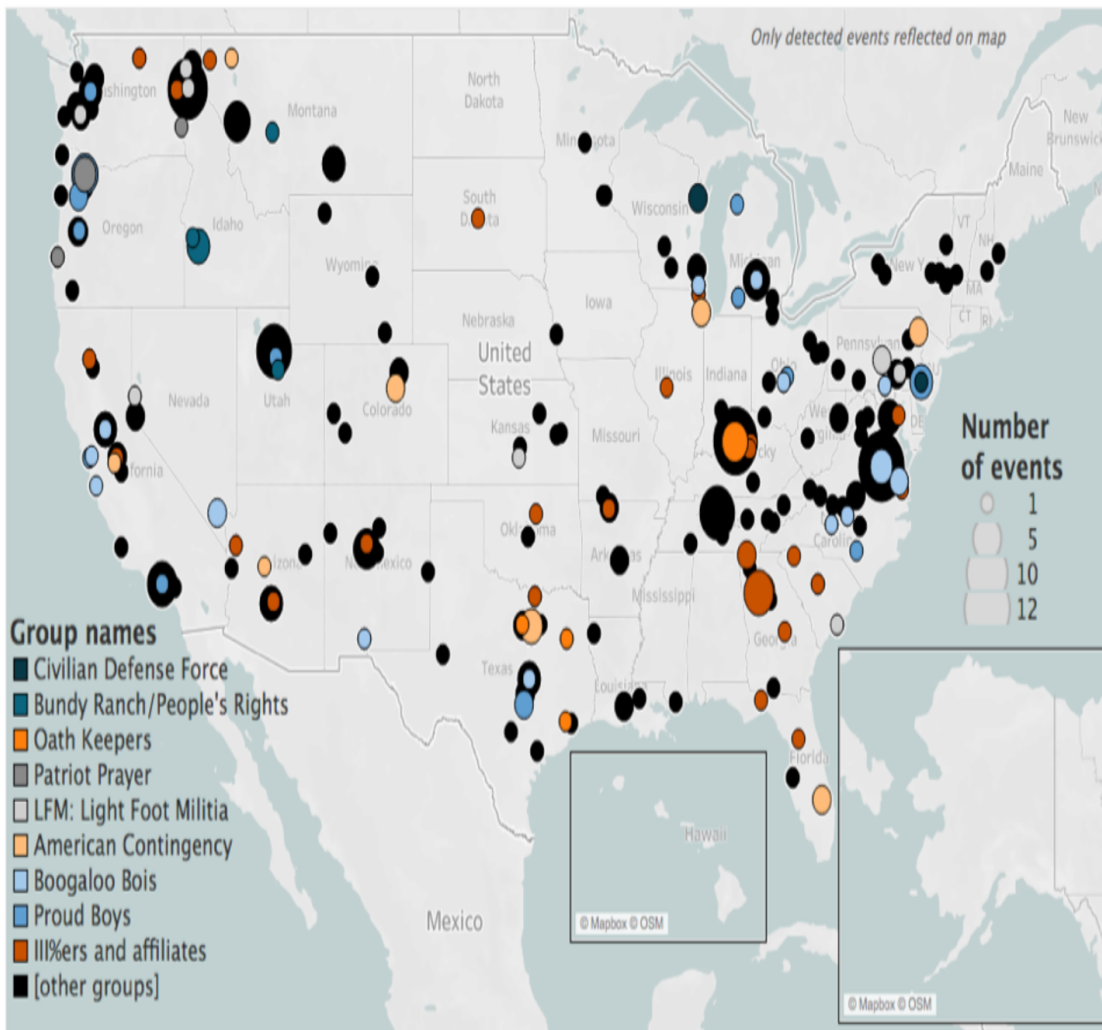


Figure 6-Militia activity as mapped by ACLED, 2020

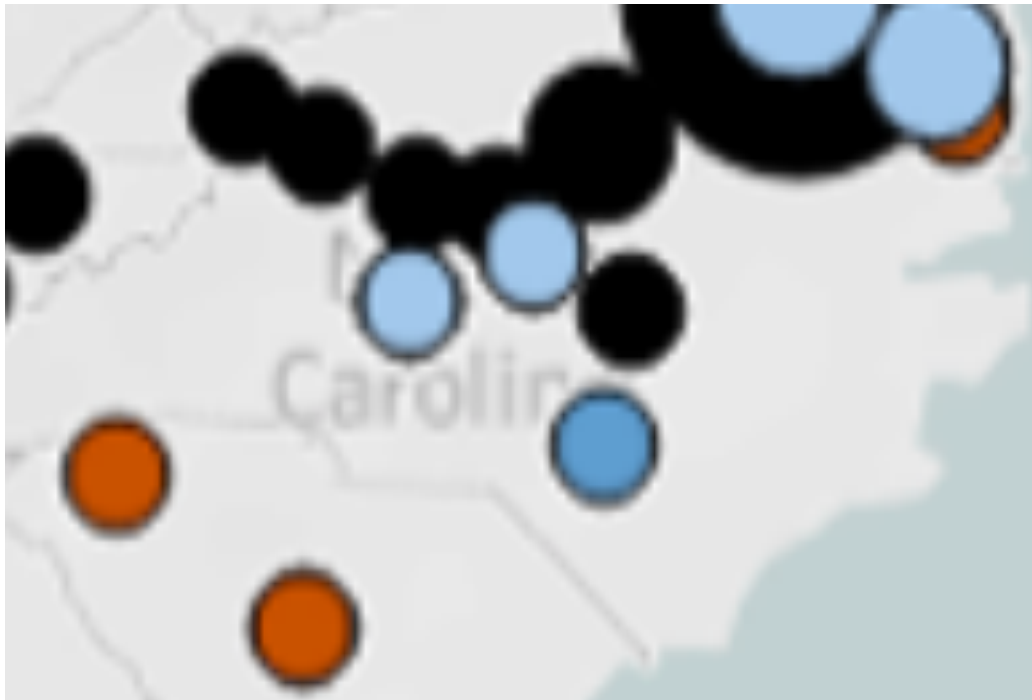


Figure 7-Zoomed in screenshot of above ACLED graphic

This illustrates the enduring potential for white nationalist violence, and both shore up the notion of (at least) tacit support for these groups and their ideals among some of the populace. Given the insurrectionist attempt on 6 January 2021, it is not unwarranted to view these projections with trepidation, particularly if one is of a marginalized community. This sense of national cohesion (or lack thereof) and our place as queer people in this American Dream landscape (or are view from the drainage ditch) is one that engendered firm and immediate reaction from participants.

One of the questions posed to them was whether queerness was related to or out of step with notions of patriotism, nationhood, and Americana, particularly given their prevalence in the region, and their responses ranged from the resigned to the defensive. Hannah (21, Indigenous, cisgender, of Pembroke—Robeson County) contended that the most American thing one can do is protest against harmful norms, but that realistically, when she thinks of people who enthusiastically tout their American nationhood, she immediately thinks of “Confederate flag people and/or Trump supporters.” Likewise, Neil (56, white, cisgender, of Robbins—Moore County) said:

I struggle with those values of patriotism, not to mention nationalism. When I feel like my rights are being trampled and I'm not being valued as an equal citizen in this country, not being protected. So we feel like we can sometimes kind of struggle with those concepts, totally.

A distinct pattern began to emerge. Krystal (29, mixed-race Latina, formerly of Raeford—Hoke County) was noticeably dejected as she said:

I'd like to think that Americanness and queerness went together here, but they don't. We are not treated like equal people here. So I've had [pauses] I've legit had people like you know they're just cool with you and then they find out you're gay and all of a sudden that default your whole personality, all of a sudden you're not the person they knew two seconds ago.

Jared (21, Indigenous, cisgender) had a perceptive take on the complications between these concepts and in particular, the symbolism behind these concepts that were hardly utopian in their inception.

The narrative of America has been to highlight the American Sublime, which is a concept with painting about glorifying the American landscape, but when you look at paintings like that there's always in the background in the dark the 'Indian savages.' So, we're highlighting the things that we like and we're kind of putting the things we don't like in the shadows. Similarly, queer people have been pushed to the shadows, and that's just the truth.

Which corresponds to what Val (32, Mexican/Latinx, nonbinary) mentioned when they specifically spoke of military-affiliated areas as beholden to a certain conservative standard:

Um, I think that they can very much coincide and coexist with each other but I think it's really weird cause with places that are predominantly with military or conservative you find queer people upholding you know like just heteronormative standards you know when it comes to relationships it's like still monogamist still have very click gender role specifically roles within their relationship even though it's like a queer relationships you know the question of like oh who's the girl is the diet using kids alive you know our stuff

that but around here there's kind of like this underlying like understanding of you know there's going to be somebody that does the domestics and there's going to be some service but right like it's very it's very straight.

Today, establishment Democrats and mainstream queer organizing alike tout the so-called progress of inclusionary measures aimed at roping queer bodies into this military foray because the military foray is the In to the *American* foray, the bright and joyous American Landscape that Jared spoke of, not this shadowy place. But, in keeping with Puar, (2007) are these merely placebo rights, or superficial salves designed to quell the dissensions of (certain) queer bodies while ignoring the needs of others? As it stands presently, what queer civil society exists in the Fort Bragg seems oriented towards the latter, though it's worth noting that playing to this sort of respectability politics has not generated enough inclusion for members of the queer community to feel at ease here. Rather, plenty expressed feelings of hesitancy when it came to living their best queer lives in the public eye. In the following section, I want to dig deeper into feelings of anxiety, unease, and straight up perilousness expressed by participants in their everyday lives as queer people in the Fort Bragg area.

Safety, Surveillance, Lives Remembered

Although it is queer people who are said to have a hidden agenda, for some reason, its usually us who are harassed while we are minding our own business, trying to exist in the world. A textbook example of being accosted for being queer, and specifically, *presenting as other*, is evidenced through Taylor's experience with that gaze:

the slips of paper people have handed me at my job...right. Ok, so when I come out of a job and I wear like regular clothes to work I'm not looking in particular one way or the other. it's neutral looking clothing, and with a hat on I could pass as a boy because with my hair sweating and not styled, and I've been at work all day, I come out of there and I'm looking hot mess, it might look like my boy. Anyway, so that's how I look as I'm

standing outside waiting for my ride when this old man walks up to me and hands me this slip of paper.

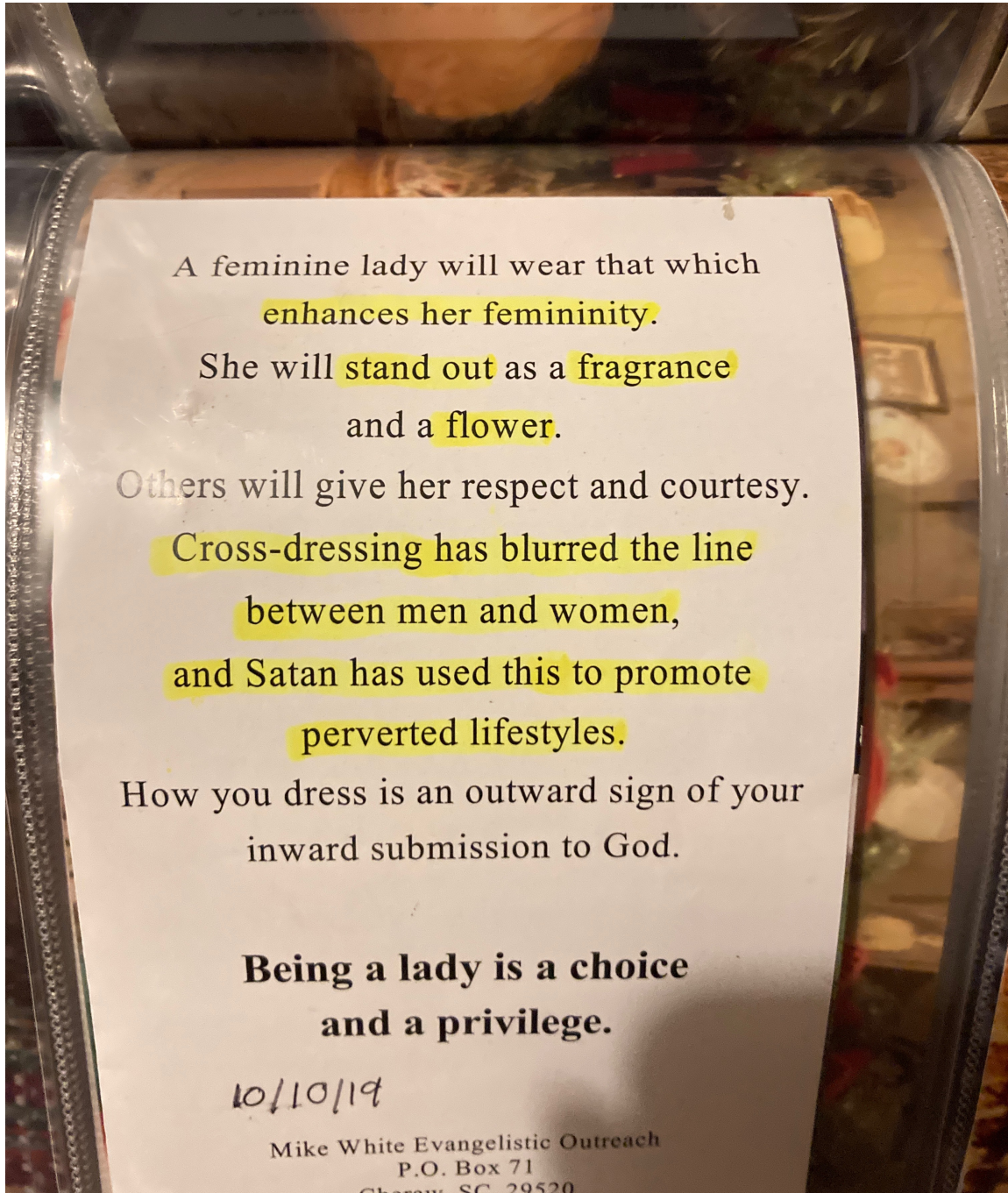


Figure 8-Message handed to Taylor as she waited for her ride outside of Cracker Barrel—
Aberdeen, NC; used with her gracious permission.

“I’m not a scared person, but I was just so fucking shocked. Because you look at this, and you know he handed it to you for a reason.” I couldn’t help but think of my own most recent experience of hostility which I too know was a direct result of my presentation [at the time, which was simply having shoulder-length hair] as a queer person happened in the summer of 2019 at a Food Lion in Whispering Pines (Moore County). I was meandering through the aisles when an employee asked me if I needed help finding anything; I thanked him, told him no, and he went about his day. In the next aisle, I proceed to hear a conversation between another gentleman and the same employee where they proceed to loudly comment on their confusion as to whether I was a man, a woman, or “one of those transgenders.” The act of being misgendered did not necessarily bother me at all—even before I had shoulder-length hair, I was often (*am* often) misgendered if speaking on the phone to someone who does not already know how I identify. I’ve simply never had a low enough register to satisfy what many people associate with a “man’s” voice; this ceased to be a self-conscious aspect of my identity almost the moment I came out. However, the issue was not the act, but the conversation *afterwards* between the employee and the other customer *about me* that was so infuriating. It was the fact that these two (presumably) heterosexual white men could make these homophobic and transphobic comments so freely without consequence in a space that was unquestionably theirs.

While I stood there processing what had just transpired, I was then presented with what could not be interpreted as anything but cold hatred in other customers eyes as he proceeded to walk past me down the aisle. To me, moments like these have a way of (at least attempting to) reify a space as cishet which then simultaneously otherize the non. This coding of space(s) has been discussed at great length through geographies of feminism and gender like Doreen Massey, Petra Doan, and Sara Ahmed in their work on affective economies. In “Space, Place, and Gender,” Massey explained the sensations she experienced in certain spaces before she had the language to articulate them: “But there were other places to which I did go, and yet where I still felt that they were not mine, or at least that they were designed to, or had the effect of, firmly letting me know my conventional subordination,” (Massey, 1994, p. 185). In “The Tyranny of Gendered Spaces:

Reflections from Beyond the Gender Dichotomy,” Petra Doan names this as an intentional and tyrannical reification of hierarchy that exists both within the subject and in the ethos:

This disciplining takes place both within ourselves, but also in external spaces that permit others to pass judgment on people who transgress the gender dichotomy...In public spaces the tyranny of gender operates when certain individuals feel empowered to act as heteronormatively constructed gender enforcers in public spaces,” (Doan, 2010, pages 6-7).

Signs, symbols, and people are all integrated into this tyrannical presence. And while Massey and Doan were ultimately alluding to affective feelings along the lines of *gender*, this can (and should) be applied to how spaces are coded along the axes of gender/race/sexuality and how this reverberates into these communities. And this legacy of deference, both to cisgender/heterosexual/white norms as well as to an institution like the military, which, for so long (and arguably, continues to do so) aligned with traditional values of faith, country, and family, does not dissipate quickly. Rather, it “sticks...sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects,” to use the phraseology of Sara Ahmed in her essay “Happy Objects,” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 29). These sticky phenomena that play a part in this conventional subordination are quite active in the Fort Bragg region because one passes through them as microaggressions or other forms of otherizing. Frankly, when these everyday sorts of microaggressions take place, it’s difficult not to feel as though one’s behavior is constantly monitored and/or can be challenged at any time. And I wasn’t the only one who spoke of similar affective experiences. When I offered participants to explain how they would describe their area of the Fort Bragg region to an outsider I was met with many forceful descriptors. Daisy (29, mixed-race Latina, cisgender, formerly of Fayetteville--Cumberland County) spoke of having a “thicker skin” for having lived there “because it was always some bullshit.” She found the region particularly unaccepting of men who presented as or were perceived as overly feminine. Lindsey (27, white, cisgender, formerly of Raeford--Hoke County) is convinced “something is in the water there” that would explain people’s adverse attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community.

Unfortunately, these sentiments were the majority of participants, but as I later learned, there had been even more pronounced instances of violence in the region's past.

As the purveyor of a queer establishment for over a decade, Wallace (63, Asian-American, cisgender, of Fayetteville-Cumberland County) had a unique (albeit traumatic) viewpoint from which he was touched by tragedy when his establishment opened in the 1990's. A friend and patron named Jimmy Riddle who was killed (allegedly by men in the military) who "drug him behind the car then threw him in a lake for dead. And he succumbed by drowning. To this day I do not think they ever found the ones who murdered Jimmy..." Although Wallace was unable to recall much detail at that time, from another source I later learned that he was referring to the murder of one Jimmy Riddle, who was brutally beaten and then deposited in College Lake at the end of Southport St in Fayetteville, where he then drowned. Thankfully, Krystal, one of the other participants and an elder in the local trans community, provided me with a YouTube video created by the Fayetteville Police Department Crime Stoppers that contains a brief synopsis of the murder. In just under two minutes, the narrator surveys the last known location that the victim was seen alive, their residence, and then where their body was located. In many ways, the video raised more questions than it answered: what does it mean that the video made no mention at all of soldiers, as Wallace had? In regard to Jimmy, questions of how they identified themselves arose after I read the caption, which referred to Jimmy as a "cross-dressing male prostitute," and is a reason why I haven't gendered them now, not knowing how Jimmy identified themselves. The fact that Jimmy hailed from Pembroke (Robeson County) and was buried in a Lumbee cemetery and a Lumbee funeral home was also not lost on me. Setting aside for a moment whether Jimmy identified as cis or trans, the fact that they were seemingly Lumbee is significant for many reasons. Indigenous people, particularly women and/or those who identify as queer and/or Two-Spirit, are at greater risk of experiencing physical, sexual, and gender-based violence (Lehavot, et al, 2009).

This is not the only documented murder of a queer person in this area. Wallace also added that in 2009, a year after he sold his business, a drag queen was murdered in the parking lot of the former club site. The victim, Jimmy Ali McCullough, who also went by Image Devera, was a well-known drag performer in the Fayetteville-area and well-liked in the Black and queer communities. Although charges were eventually brought up on a suspect, McCullough's sister, Kathy McCullough, alleged that the police department had done very little to investigate her brother's death (WRAL, 2009). Encountering apathy when one ought to encounter compassion and vigilance, particularly from the police, is of course notoriously common in cases involving Black and queer bodies. As part of police apathy often means failure to act on cases involving marginalized people, the fact that an investigation was launched at all was surprising to me. And while finding the murderer undoubtedly meant closure for the family, investigations that lead to more arrests and more participation in the prison-industrial complex do not address or solve the root causes of violence against queer people. Increased criminalization (including any aspects of hate crime legislation that reinscribe carceral solutions and tendencies) will not alleviate rampant socio-economic inequality in late-stage capitalism, which reinforces structural biases against queer and trans people, people of color, and the working-class.

As it stands now, for Jimmy Riddle (and who knows how many unknown, "anonymous," overlooked others), the trail seems to have run cold. While I am resigned to the notion that this unsolved murder is one of many threads that I may have to put on hold to pursue further during my PhD journey, I cannot help but dwell on the many potential Jamie's and Jimmy's of this region whose lives were cut short, whose killers have evaded justice, whose very stories remain fragmented and forgotten. What does it mean that there is little record of this person's death? We can expect that sort of treatment from community outsiders, but part of the responsibility lies with the queer people of the community to both honor these memories and also to name the forces that continue to assist in the destruction of queer bodies. In a region with a paucity of queer civil society, it is imperative for the organizations that do exist to maintain an archive of queer history here. Had that existed, had some semblance of continuity between queer groups,

queer spaces, and queer collective memory existed, it wouldn't take over an hour of creative Googling to *begin* to entertain the possibility that hardly record exists of a man's death, of a man's life.

These violent and sudden endings to queer lives are not unique to this area, but unlike mainstream queer locales, where one can often find a plaque or a street sign denoting the birth/death/influence of a queer member of that community, there is no such commemoration to be found in the Fort Bragg region. In a region where a Black Lives Matter mural was defaced in the same downtown area where a local business owner defiantly claimed not only that the South would rise again, but that rejoiced when George Floyd was murdered, it is difficult to conceive of any sort of commemoration honoring the memory of a queer person. At the dawn of a new presidency, one which will undoubtedly put forth new measures that will be lauded as broader attempts at inclusivity (but will probably manifest as promise projects designed to shore up empire) one wonders how this will trickle down to the Fort Bragg region. Admittedly, it is difficult to envision counties like Cumberland, Hoke, Moore, and Robeson following the lead of the decidedly more progressive counties like Durham, Guilford, and Orange, all of which passed LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination ordinances in January 2021. Major regional cities like Fayetteville pose as a stark contrast to these measures. Even organizations like the Human Rights Campaign that are bastions of the Homonormative Turn (see Agathangelou, et al, 2008) have scored it a meager thirty-nine points out of one hundred on its 2019 Municipal Equality Index, which measures (certain) policies at the state, county, and city level of (economically significant locales, Raleigh M.S.A., Charlotte M.S.A., e.g.) to determine their inclusivity.

In the way of non-discrimination laws, a category that evaluates whether discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity is prohibited by the city, county, or state in areas of employment, housing, and public accommodations, Fayetteville scored zero out of thirty possible points. For law enforcement, the HRC allotted twelve out of twelve points for reporting

hate crime statistics in 2017, it received zero out of an available ten points in the subcategory of LGBTQ police liaison and/or task force. This stood out for two reasons: one being that it's crucial to note that the HRC did *not* include any provision on the scorecard to account for county, city, and/or municipally-funded alternatives to policing that would benefit queer people, particularly queer people of color, who are subject to higher rates of incarceration and police violence. Again, we see an example of assimilationist policies by measuring inclusion based on acceptance in institutions like the police and the military. Secondly, in one of the two murders of queer people divulged by participants, the victim's sister lambasted the City of Fayetteville police department for failing to adequately investigate her brother's death as well as a lack of transparency.

This scorecard, flawed though it may be in the way of equality qualifiers, exhibits striking interstices in protections for anyone falling under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella. While this is by no means a comprehensive (nor substantive, I would argue) indicator of the quality of life for queer people in the region, to the critical gaze, the idea of a homonormative organization like the HRC awarding Fayetteville such an abysmal score is another clear sign of the region's conservative disposition. And this is in cities that *were* surveyed, to say nothing of the other cities and townships that did not warrant the attention of the HRC. There are no qualifiers for work environments that exist outside of state and county employment, nor were smaller towns like Red Springs, in Robeson County, or Vass, Moore County (two of many) included. Efforts like these by the Human Rights Commission might be well-intentioned, but they read as preoccupied with neoliberal tendencies to shore up the carceral state while virtually ignoring the needs of queer people living in the hinterland. To be sure, this inability to maneuver freely as a queer person in turn has an effect on queer social reproduction in this region. It can be viewed through the presence of __, but it can also be seen through the proliferation of spillover and at multiple scales. If we accept Doreen Massey's notion of space as "an articulation of social relations, nets of which have over time been constructed, laid down, interacted with one another, decayed, and renewed," then it is only necessary that we think critically about the ways in which the political

economy of the defense industry has informed this region's particular social relations (Massey, 1994, p. 170). This imprinting onto the landscape is no more self-evident than through the resultant economic spillover and its impact on queer social reproduction.

CHAPTER V: QUEER SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DEFENSE ECONOMY

“Remember, the hidden abode is powerful because it is both motivation and disguise.”

D. Soyini Madison, “My Desire is for the Poor to Speak Well of Me”

One of the aims of these research is to adumbrate the ways in which queer geographies are spatially constituted by the region’s *economic* geographies. Although the unprecedented amount of funding allocated to the defense budget to the tune of \$690 billion dollars is public knowledge, one might be surprised to know just how ingratiated the defense industry is in the American political economy. Not only the defense industry proper, but its adjacent industries like defense contractors, security companies, and the many organizations that align themselves economically, politically, and socially; that amalgamation commonly referred to as the military industrial complex. Angela Davis comments on the ubiquity of companies like G4S (Group 4 Security) that “under the guise of security and the security state...have insinuated themselves into the lives of people all over the world,” and not only through security initiatives, but by becoming engaged at a community level (Davis, 2016, p. 5). What was shocking to discover were the ways in which the tentacles of the military industrial complex have become entrenched at multiple *scales*, and how, in fact, they are very localized here. The military economy is *the* primary throughput of the region, and the counties of Cumberland, Hoke, and Moore can be viewed as oriented politically, socially, and economically around this military economy, and more broadly, a pervasive military culture. A hyper-concentration of Americana certainly permeates the surrounding areas outside of Fort Bragg proper; Fayetteville is called the All-American City; American flags (complete with war memorials) pervade the downtowns of the nearby cities of Southern Pines and Raeford. Stickers proudly, almost defiantly touting their status (Veteran Owned) adhere to the external storefronts of businesses, and retailers galore typically offer an array of military discounts; less so for educators or students. Rare are they who

have not/do not/will not have a family member or close friend who is in military, if they are not themselves.

A complete survey of this visceral insinuation of the defense economy on a regional scale will certainly be better suited to my future dissertation, and even then, a complete account might be impossible, it is a moving target, after all. Nevertheless, I would be remiss if I did not highlight the convergence of industry and labor and resources into this web of interdependent industries. For example, it's important to point out that the four counties in this field site are part of the larger eleven-county branding dubbed the All-American Defense Corridor, which seeks to woo military contracts to bolster the state's economic development, enough to one day rival Research Triangle Park (WRAL, 2007). Some local leaders have taken enthusiastically to this task, as evidenced by a piece in Moore County newspaper *The Pilot* that highlighted the ways in which the defense industry was “quietly boosting the regional economy.” When interviewed, Tammy Everett, executive director for the North Carolina Defense Business Association, a self-sustaining nonprofit that provides networking opportunities, resources and connections to help businesses grow in the defense industry, spoke to the synergistic way in which local industry aids these efforts. “The connection between all of these businesses — whether it is a farmer, or a hotel, or a technology company — is the military influence,” Everett said. “There are a lot of businesses in the area with military ties that are not necessarily ever going to seek a defense contract, but they are contributing to the defense industry,” (Douglas, 2018). Lastly, Everett asserts that “every single business sector you can think of can, and should, support the military in some way,” (Ibid).

While it doesn't do to dwell, this is certainly a chilling statement; it is also a useful and informative one. Although, as the article from *The Pilot* expressed, these industries are attempting to discreetly maneuver in this regional economy, they are in fact ubiquitous. What's more, they are welcomed with open arms and actively accommodated because they are lucrative.

Presumably, this leaves little room for debate about alternate uses for these resources, to say nothing of dissent. Tyler (23, white, cisgender, who has lived in both Fayetteville, in Cumberland County and Aberdeen, in Moore County) stated that “queerness is tolerated as long as we’re going with the flow, and I think tolerated is the best word for it.” It stands to reason, then, that any impediment to the “flow” of this regional defense economy, a multi-billion-dollar enterprise, would not only conflict with the goals of local stakeholders, but might also be reflected in the praxes of regional queer organizations. Before I attempt to dissect how queer civil society in this region has upheld these tendrils of empire I first want to further illuminate the geographies of the defense economy in the All-American Defense Corridor. For starters, 1/3 of all military contracting in NC occurs in the Southeast region, an area that is already allotted some \$2.8 billion in Department of Defense spending and which houses over 100,000 active duty soldiers. Many of the 18,000 military personnel exiting the military annually matriculate into the defense contracting industry, which may be even more abundant with the \$3.4 trillion awarded for the NCSE region (*North Carolina’s Southeast*, 2021).

Therefore, the lines between military and civilian are undoubtedly blurred presently, but it has not always been so. Although the United States has harbored imperial aims since its conception as a nation, it was during World War I that apparatuses like Fort Bragg became loci for intense nationalist fervor and hemorrhaged federal spending (Lutz, **2001**). Throughout the duration of this project, the former Trump Administration requested an astounding \$750 billion dollar budget, one that would, in the words of Former Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick M. Shanahan, “makes necessary investments in next-generation technology, space, missiles, and cyber capabilities. The operations and capabilities supported by this budget will strongly position the US military for great power competition for decades to come,”(Department of Defense, 2019) Under a new administration, the defense budget has yet again reached unprecedented heights. This, in conjunction with recent air strikes in Libya, can put to rest any doubts surrounding this administration’s intensions concerning the military industrial complex. Naturally, with yet another truly incomprehensible figure devoted to this industry, and with Fort

Bragg being one of the most vital, if not *the* most vital cog in this growth machine, it is no surprise that there would be little room for criticism of its sheer scale and influence. Indeed, queer veterans like Ashley (31, Indigenous-Taino, cisgender)

Quite often, discharged and/or retired soldiers pivot to the lucrative federal security contract industry, and companies like Academi (formerly Blackwater) are located in North Carolina, and this is but one example. The ongoing diffusion of Western capitalism into other nations, either via multinational corporations like Amazon and Apple and/or through military occupation is contingent upon the exploitation of death of the nation's inhabitants which in turn shore up the consumptive lifestyles of the Global North. Clearly, these outfits quite often sing a different tune, as seen below in Figure 10. At the very least, queer people should be openly opposing these industries because they align themselves with those who would do us harm; this type of configuration reinforces a concentration of this values, which are inherently anti-queer.



Figure 9-Quantico Tactical: Northwestern Hoke County, October 2020; author photo.

To reiterate, mapping the rhizomic nature of this defense economy was not feasible for this master’s thesis. Given that the geography of defense contracting is not always publicly visible (as indicated by the article from *The Pilot*) and quite possibly, similar to quantifying the number of churches, it could very well be a moving target. What I am trying to convey by using these examples is how (and why, and where, and so on) organizations like these continue to prosper, reproduce, *dominate*, while queer establishments and queer civil society withers, disappears, or exists as centrist organizing that, in the words of Spencer (22, white, cisgender, of Southern Pines—Moore County) “caters to straight allies.” A foundational element in this civil society component is the existence of infrastructure to support this specific type of economic

development in this region. Take for example North Carolina’s Southeast—a regional public-private partnership that markets the state’s Southeast Region – nationally and globally – to encourage new economic growth (North Carolina’s Southeast, 2019). Similarly, the North Carolina Military Business Center, located in Cumberland County, is on a mission “to leverage military and other federal business opportunities to expand the economy, grow jobs and improve quality of life in North Carolina,” with its primary goal being to “increase federal revenues for businesses in North Carolina,” (NCMBC, 2021). These are two of an unknown number of organizations to help the DoD economy thrive and expand not only here, but throughout the state. We have discussed how active duty military and veterans have a civil society organizational infrastructure catering to a litany of socio-economic and/or networking needs. Not only does this vast network of business and economic civil society help to sustain the defense economy, but its social component often provides another apparatus for right-wing organizing.



Figure 10-Moore County Veterans Motorcycle Club with Trump signs, March 2021, over 5 months after the election in November; author photo.

All of these interrelated structures are sustained by this cyclical flow of capital, resources, ideas, and bodies that move throughout this regional space. Retired and/or recently discharged soldiers fall into degree programs in local colleges and universities that heavily market network security or logistics programs; when they graduate, they matriculate into the local defense contract work. defense contracts continue to be awarded, people continue to retire from the military and/or go to school to obtain these skillsets, the cycle continues. Since schools too are sites for social reproduction, how local institutions of higher learning direct their resources can be used to glean

their economic, social, and political priorities. For example, economic development organizations like the aforementioned North Carolina's Southeast are sponsored by Fayetteville Technical Community College (North Carolina's Southeast, 2021). Similarly, Fayetteville Technical Community College has hosted a Defense Trade Show for (at least) nineteen years, an event that "promises extensive networking opportunities and workshops for prospective and current federal contractors. Static displays, military demonstrations and live vendor demonstrations also will be part of the event," (Brooks, 2018).

Similarly, the business center at Sandhills Community College offers many free and tuition-based classes and seminars devoted to integrating into the business of defense contracting and military surplus. Suffice it to say, these schools are part and parcel to the institutionalization of these types of industries in the economic geography of this region. While the existence of institutions of higher learning as cogs in this growth machine does not inherently negate the presence of queer space and queer groups, there are undoubtedly patterns of scarcity (on the queer end) in concentrations of these military geographies that should give us pause. Further, the praxis, activist frameworks, and outreach of the queer community of the Fort Bragg region must name this socio-economic influence if they are to actively avoid being contoured by it. Although this thesis will peer further into brick and mortar symbols of queer community, I first want to discuss the aspects of queer community that are reinforced, taught, and redistributed through the relationships and activism of queer groups through a genealogy of queer civil society in this study area.

A Genealogy of Queer Civil Society in the Fort Bragg Region

Prior to this study, and despite having lived in the area for the better part of 20 years, I had no real knowledge of queer groups and/or queer activism in this region outside of the two

organizations listed below. Through some of my participants who were/are elders in the queer community, I learned that there has been, at various junctures, a larger queer organizational infrastructure. In terms of exclusively queer-centered organizations *currently* serving the region, diversity of thought and long-term goals are seemingly limited by the paucity of active organizations. Two of the most prominent are Fayetteville PRIDE, and Sandhills PRIDE, located in Cumberland County and Moore County, respectively. Hoke County and Robeson County, being the most rural, are situated between and/or beside these two counties and lacks a defined urban center, thus, any sense of cosmopolitanism is typically oriented towards either Cumberland or Moore. As mentioned previously, one of the aims of this research was to assess the nature and scale of queer civil society and critique its methodology, policy platforms, and outreach. The following survey will render details about praxis and outreach through analysis and interpretation of media (both social media and textual) as well as insight from participants.

Fayetteville Pride (2016-Present)



Figure 11-A blend of the American flag with the Pride flag as seen on the Fayetteville Pride Facebook site.

The Facebook photo of the former is a picture detailing the union of the American flag with the rainbow/pride flag; what can one infer from this graphic? The message seems clear: “We’re Americans too!” Without knowing the complete membership of this organization--which is undoubtedly fluid, as is the case with many nonprofits whose members/patrons give varying levels of commitment-- does one interpret this union as an embodiment of Americana that has lent itself to the local queer experience? Are there large numbers of current or prior military personnel in its ranks, or is this a measure of deference to the overarching cultural theme of the region, one in which an obsequiousness to the American flag and what it claims to represent is necessary for the legitimacy of the organization? This organization’s imagery is in keeping with what Agathangelou et al term “the Homonormative Turn,” or that which links inclusion aims with patriotic socio-cultural symbols to reify (and really, *assuage* a queerphobic majority) Joe Blue Collar of the All-Americanness of (certain) queer people (Agathangelou, et al, 2008, p. 124).

But what happens when one cannot or will not acquiesce to this mentality? Where does this leave the queer person who rejects the symbolism of the American flag for its ongoing violence against nonwhite others both domestically and abroad? Fayetteville Pride is one of the most visible queer organizations of the Fort Bragg area because of the organization’s Pride events in the summers of 2018 and 2019, the first ever of their kind for this region. I do want to name the importance of these type of events in terms of how they can be empowering for queer people, but there are a number of queer identities that do not feel as though liberation is sufficiently widespread as to *justify* a pride. Yet, queer people who do not have access to theory and analytical frameworks might not care about the implications of having a large police presence at Pride, or having floats sponsored by military contractors or elite finance institutions; they want to celebrate, dance, sing, and live their queer lives to their fullest expression, the same as people at Pride’s in other cities, which is how it *should be*. The queer people of the Fort Bragg region deserve these things as much as anyone else.

However, it is one thing to welcome veterans and active-duty military members who are also queer people; to forgo their inclusion would work against a defining principle of queer thought. However, it is quite another to *preference* them or orient a queer organization around appeasing militarism is antithetical to what a queer organization should be. There *must be* a profound delineation between the two because the value-sets are not the same. It is a question of reciprocity; who does this really benefit, and more importantly, to whose *detriment*? As Puar contends, the absence of reciprocity creates an unrequited love that “keeps multicultural (and also homonormative) subjects in the folds of nationalism, while xenophobic and homophobic ideologies and policies fester,” (Puar, 2007, p. 26).

Lastly, and perhaps most curious of all, is a small section on the Fayetteville PRIDE website entitled “Why the Asterisk,” in which, arguably, one can see just how much certain queer geographies have departed from their radical origins. This subsection of their site details why LGBTQ* is the moniker on their official documentation such as the IRS 501(c)(3), etc, which allows them to operate as a nontaxable, nonprofit organization. Whilst filing this paperwork, the organization deliberated on how to include multiple experiences in the acronym without it being too cumbersome as a turn-of-phrase. Thus, they left the acronym, in their words,

to represent that which has been omitted or left out, and it acknowledges that omission and makes it visible. It struck us that the asterisk not only symbolized our acronyms’ missing letters, but also characterized our community. We are too often left out of the cultural and political conversations about sexual preference and gender identities. We have too long been omitted from legal protections and equal rights. The asterisk represents us all. Let people see the asterisk and have the courage to ask what it means.

To be sure, the aim to include all within the queer spectrum should be the goal of these organizations, but it is the quest for equal rights that leads the leftist queer to give them the proverbial side-eye. The issue at hand is the phrase “omitted from legal protections and equal

rights;” which legal rights, specifically? Mainstream LGBT rights organizations have long sought inclusion in organizations like marriage and the military, but the “inclusion” stops there, when the reality is that there are infinitely more significant issues impacting *all* queer people, but *especially* nonwhite, non-cisgender queer bodies. Here, the prospectus presented by Bassichis et al is crucial because they present systemic harms and proceed to distinguish between “official” solutions (read: mainstream, white LGBT frameworks) and approaches that reframe activism to benefit *all* queer people. Thus, the push to legalize same-sex marriage for the purposes of health benefits for same-sex couples ought to be reframed as a push for universal health care for all, regardless of orientation, marital status, or incarceration status. Data from applications like the Human Rights Campaign Municipal Equality Index quantifies based on a combination of legal rights, economic contribution, and representation. “The Municipal Equality Index (MEI) examines how inclusive municipal laws, policies, and services are of LGBTQ people who live and work there. Cities are rated based on non-discrimination laws, the municipality as an employer, municipal services, law enforcement and the city leadership's public position on equality,” (Municipal Equality Index, 2019).

Thus, even though this index is largely predicated on neoliberal conceptualizations of *economic contribution* by LGBT citizens, even it ranks cities like Fayetteville a mere thirty-nine out of one hundred. Again, one can see the value system in place by mainstream organizations like the HRC, which puts conditions on the usefulness of queer bodies in relation the capitalist production. Similarly, an elimination of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, seen as a major victory by organizations like the Human Rights Campaign, does nothing to disrupt the fascist-nationalist rhetoric spewed by the current administration or any of the previous administrations. Moreover, the inclusion in this institution only furthers the spread of violence against Black and Brown bodies abroad. Instead, queer activism should focus on a *counter recruitment*; as Bassichis et al contend, the transformative approach would be to “join with war resisters, radical veterans, and young people to oppose military intervention, occupation, and war abroad and at home, and demand the reduction/elimination of ‘defense’ budgets,” (Bassichis, et al, 2015, p. 18).

Unfortunately, nothing in the platforms of either Fayetteville PRIDE or Sandhills Pride indicates a radical departure from these neoliberal aspirations.

Sandhills Pride (2013-Present)

Situated in Moore County, like Fayetteville Pride, the organization does not have a physical space. Their standpoint, as their website indicates, reads: “We envision a Sandhills where all LGBTQ+ people are supported, heard, valued, equal, and experience true community.” They host gatherings centered more on gatherings, meals, and recreation (less so as the Covid-19 pandemic rages on) and less so on policy work. Their two main policy planks are a scholarship program for area high school seniors as well as the establishment of Safe Zones in area high schools. Despite the fact that the Sandhills is a geographic region is comprised of multiple counties, including all four named in this thesis, the general purview of this group does not seem to extend beyond the borders of Moore County, which could potentially explain why many of the participants living outside of this county were unaware of its existence.

The organization has a board of directors and a full-time executive director; both set the policy and fundraising agenda. Two of the main undertakings are a scholarship program for area high school seniors and establishing Safe Zones in local k-12 schools. The organization is active on social media sites like Facebook and Instagram. Regrettably, on social media, Sandhills Pride exudes much of the same deference to empire, and despite the distance from the epicenter that is Fort Bragg, it does seem to be as inundated by its seductions. To be sure, Moore County and the Sandhills Region are still military regions, but they are also situated in a region with another major employer, the Pinehurst Resort, an internationally renowned hotel, golf course, and spa. As one might surmise, this not only magnetizes a cluster of elitism, it fosters a larger sense of reactionary economic ideology through a maximization of profit that, when juxtaposed with an overarching military culture, makes for an oppressive environment indeed, and infinitely more so for queer people.

While there is no HRC municipal scorecard for this area, it stands to reason that the same qualifiers, such as economic contribution, would be used. This atmosphere of elitism and exclusivity throughout many areas of Moore County has naturally produced exacerbated class issues that predate Sandhills Pride. Even so, it is imperative that that positionality is not the lens through which the needs of queer people are assessed, but that it requires engagement with queer people of color and women of color, meeting them where they are and listening to their unique needs and struggles. It does not mean, as Spencer (22, white, cisgender) noted, playing the role of a queer organization that “caters to its straight allies.” Judging by their 2020 year-end review, a circular mailed out to interested parties to provide an update on the scope of the organization, there remain some serious concerns about the focus of both their worldview and resources. What follows will be a close reading of some of the media from this organization.



Figure 12-Bulletin from Sandhills Pride demonstrating generic patriotic imagery; author photo of pamphlet.

Straightaway, we see the symbols of patriotic correctness at play through the placement of American flags alongside the various merchandise to be given away at Pinehurst's annual Holly Arts & Crafts Festival. However, I do acknowledge that not everyone immediately equates free American flag as a signifier of global imperialism. Unfortunately, within the pamphlet there is ample content that exudes that same neoliberal inclusivity flavor. A preface entitled "Community During Covid" fawns over the Biden Administration and its inclusion of voices from the queer community, much like the majority of mainstream organizations. It details how there are queer and trans people in the transition team and how trans people were mentioned for the first time in a presidential acceptance speech. It then transitions to operations in the time of Covid, in which we are to understand that the organization has become more "flexible" that "still succeeds in addressing the needs of our community. Our meetings have moved online through Zoom, and we are engaging new activities including hikes, grape pickings, outdoor movie viewings, and online safe spaces." To be sure, those sound like delightful activities that many a queer person might enjoy. In terms of substantive policy and outreach, the literature indicates that they have developed relationships and programming with the NAACP, the Boys & Girls Club of the Sandhills, and local colleges. And, perhaps most shockingly of all, in the review of the year, the killing of George Floyd, the massive and multiscalar protests in response to the injustice and police violence--including a volatile event in Fayetteville--nor did they mention the exploding rates of murders of trans people. Notably, they *did* make it a point to mention the passing of the "fierce ally" that was Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

 **Sandhills Pride**
May 17, 2020 · 🌐

Join us in taking a stand against homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia — not just today, but everyday.

 **Sparta - A Transgender Military Advocacy Organization**
May 17, 2020 · 🌐

Today, on International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, and every day, join us in taking a stand against discrimination and fighting for equality.



Figure 13-Sandhills Pride proffering militarism on International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia, as depicted on their Facebook site, May 2020.

Sandhills Pride’s Facebook post on the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia is another apt example of the deference to patriotic correctness displayed by queer organizations (see Figure 13). We can see that it is actually a shared post; it’s original authors—Sparta: A Transgender Military Advocacy Organization—undoubtedly shared the post because of the abuse transgender soldiers suffer in the armed forces. While it is not untoward for Sandhills Pride to share the post as a queer organization in a military region, it is certainly curious that this was the *only* post shared by the organization on this day of rebuking homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia. What is the point of proffering these integrationist mediums when it can only lead to more death and destruction—who is the audience? Posts by Sandhills Pride regarding trans participation in the military serve only to reinforce these assumptions without critiquing the need for this sort of inclusion and what benefits, if any, it would have to trans people and whether this would continue to harm people in the Global South. This sort of posturing can undermine more progressive arguments aimed at tackling the underlying structural and material needs of queer people. This middle-of-the-road praxis is naturally reflected in the group’s cohort, which in turn makes it more susceptible to the pitfalls of white supremacy in queer activism. Here in the Fort Bragg region, we are yet again at a disadvantage: we don’t even have a queer bar, let alone a community center from which to strategize on how to address these needs horizontally and comprehensively.

How does queer organizing in the Fort Bragg region fit into the context of this influential and widespread defense economy? inevitably leads to exponential growth (Hoke County Land Use Plan, 2005) (Moore County Land Use Plan, 2020) with no degree of certainty as to whether this rapid will be beneficial for working-class queer people. Krystal (29, cisgender, mixed-race Latina) felt that the benefits of this growth were not ubiquitous. “There is a lot of economic struggle in the queer community here. We don’t have resources to deal with homelessness and healthcare; something that benefits poor queer people.” Economic insecurity can embody myriad forms; it can mean lack of access to an array of economic opportunities and support groups like queer workers unions, queer civil society groups, queer entrepreneurial and networking

functions, all of which offer critical support to queer people navigating both heteronormativity and capitalism. Frustratingly, but not surprisingly, members of the trans community are the most impacted by this lack of infrastructure. Two participants who were on the Board of Directors at Sandhills Pride both spoke of community members looking to the organization for guidance and leaving upset about a lack of insight. One board member indicated that members of the trans community looking for recommendations in the way of healthcare felt like Sandhills Pride was not taking their issues seriously. The search for progressive medical care for members of the queer community has often been a challenge, especially for trans people. Krystal (61, white, transgender) has been active in the queer and trans community of Fayetteville for decades. She conveyed that trans people of the Fort Bragg region have long sought medical care elsewhere in cities like Raleigh or even Atlanta because of transphobic local practitioners.

The history of access to healthcare for members of the queer community is obviously one of exclusionary practices, of *inaccess* to healthcare based on sexuality and/or gender expression. Inevitably, when one thinks of the queer community and medical care, one cannot help but think of the ongoing struggles of queer people living with HIV/AIDS. Queer communities have long been especially decimated, and nearly an entire generation of people who should now be elders and teachers in the community, were lost. North Carolina was certainly not immune to the impacts of the disease, and it was most acutely devastating in rural counties and among African-American communities (Inrig, 2011). Because there has not been extensive mapping or historiography pursued on the queer community here, a comprehensive assessment of the impact remains woefully incomplete. Queer elders that I interviewed had their own perspectives, but often a lingering grief that was quite palpable. In the past, there have been nonprofit groups that by nature of their mission, inevitably provided medical services to queer people, especially in HIV/AIDS care. Inrig observed that especially in communities “lacking an organized gay presence—like Cumberland County, which had accumulated the third highest number of HIV/AIDS cases in the state by 1986—” groups of healthcare workers and community advocates would form organizations designed to facilitate care and funding (Inrig, 2011, p. 46). It was

through some of the participants that I learned about organizations of the Fort Bragg region like the Dogwood Consortium.

Dogwood Consortium (1986-Unknown)

Funding from the Ryan White Care Act went to HIV/AIDS organizations like Dogwood Consortium. From my understanding, this group (or semi-organized groupings of care in various facilities, it is unclear) triaged those infected with HIV/AIDS, as well as their families, to what little services were available at the peak of the AIDS crises and throughout the 1980's-90's. The daily activities, the number of patients, who in the community was involved; the answers to these questions largely seem to reside in the Gay and Lesbian Health Project records that are held at the Duke University library. However, three months-worth of investigating finally discovered that the organization went defunct due to, at least in part, charges of embezzlement. Who that individual(s) was remains unclear, as to whether they were a member of the queer community, or an outsider taking advantage of an already-marginalized group at a time of mortal peril. Only when Covid-19 subsides will these records be accessible. In the meantime, it is my goal to shed more light on this saga, and specifically to honor the members of the queer community with connection to this organization, in my eventual dissertation project.

Cumberland County HIV Task Force (1986-Present?)

It was during that same deadly year—1986—that the Cumberland County HIV Task Force was formed. According to their profile on Volunteer Match, the HIV Task Force functions as a clearinghouse for information and education on HIV/AIDS. Their outreach includes billboard campaigns, which have aimed to raise awareness around HIV testing; workshops with churches,

k-12 schools, institutions of higher learning, and communities; and a Speakers Bureau that triangulates educational speaking engagements with various local agencies and citizens. Lastly, the task force “believes that an educated community and one that has access to resources can have a major impact on reducing the spread of this virus and help those infected find and stay in treatment. The impact has gone beyond the local community to be considered one of the best in the state and has had a positive influence on those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.” Needless to say, an organization any researcher of like-mind would want to engage with. Unfortunately, obtaining an interview a representative from this agency was not to be. Research protocol during COVID-19 being what it was/is, I was not permitted to meet anyone in person; attempts to get in contact via phone and email were unsuccessful and the website is no longer current. It is my hope that I will one day be able to have a dialogue with one or more of the individuals from this organization. To be able to bear witness to their work, what they have seen and contributed to the community would be an immense honor and privilege. While I will continue to strive to not only map the location of this and other places, to find a way to acknowledge the lives of the people impacted by this organization, I admit that the unknowns about this aspect of our local queer history continues to occupy my thoughts.

Other voids in queer-centric care include substance-abuse related recovery groups specifically designed for queer people who struggle with addiction. As with many other heterosexually-coded spaces, queer people in recovery may not always relate to the more traditional Alcoholics Anonymous and/or Narcotics Anonymous groups. Queer-centric recovery spaces *do* exist, but simply elsewhere. A cursory Google search produces aggregators like Therapy Tribe (seemingly not owned and/or administered by Indigenous people) that can route one to a LGBTQIA+ addiction therapist in their area; in this case, the closest area in North Carolina being Charlotte, well over two hours away for most of the Fort Bragg region (Therapy Tribe, 2021). Exclusively queer recovery spaces exist through the Gay and Sober network, but it too tends to coalesce among urban centers, this time both Charlotte and Raleigh (Gay and Sober, 2021). At this point of the thesis, we should not delude ourselves into concluding that there is no need for these

providers in the confluence of the socio-cultural dynamics of this region. At least three participants (Lindsey, Krystal, and Michael) all spoke of their recovery journeys and the assumed heteronormativity of recovery spaces. Further, there remain contemporary issues among the medical field (and in this forthcoming example, perhaps specifically in the military medical apparatus) in regard to progressive preventive care.

Imaginative geographies of cultural conservatism serve to create a culture of shame that propagates the policing of gender expression/regulation of body types. Those with the queer community are most likely familiar with the notion of Passing; the act of being able to *pass* as straight and/or *pass* as cisgender; to be unclockable to the casual observer. Being able to pass as heterosexual or pass as cisgender remains an important survival tool for queer people trying to live their lives undetected, unbothered. To move about in this landscape, then, means to subject oneself to a gaze that is shaped by conservative norms. For those who cannot or will not conform to certain gendered behavior standards in the way of speech, ideology, and certainly, appearance, there are frequent reminders of what it means to transgress those boundaries. Queer people like Chris (52, white, cisgender) who otherwise might blend into larger cishet society and thus be able to shield themselves with the privilege imbued with passing as a heterosexual white male, the interactions can be quite jarring.

When he inquired about Truvada (PrEP) a prescription drug to protect against contracting HIV, his healthcare provider at Womack Army Medical Hospital pretended not to know what it was, and when pressed, referred him to the STD clinic on base, where he was then lectured by physician about the dangers of casual sex, although there had been no discussion about the frequency of sexual activity. How can these types of incidents be viewed as anything *but* a reconsolidation of medical pathologization of “deviant” sexualities? Despite these so-called advances in queer rights, even queers at the pinnacle of the socio-economic hierarchy face institutional discrimination. In “Intimate Investments: Homonormativity, Global Lockdown, and

the Seductions of Empire,” Agathangelou et al contend that even for elite queers, promises of rights for certain queer bodies are tenuous (Agathangelou, et al, p. 135). As I began to assess the various economic geographies of this region, the synergy between the institutionalization of military culture, on one hand, and the regional economic base, on the other, began to coalesce. While it was certainly tempting to remain in this space of dissecting existential affective economies it was important for me to survey the microgeographies of being queer at the workplace. What are the everyday geographies of being queer on the job?

Working While Queer: Navigating Work Space

I want to begin by sharing the experiences of participants who were current or formerly active duty soldiers; not to showcase the experiences of queer soldiers as such, but to highlight how and despite this continued outpouring of zeal (not to mention *resources*) for greater “inclusion” in these institutions, queer people continue to face systemic discrimination and hostility there because it was never a space meant for the celebration of other identities. Prior to the legalization of openly gay and lesbian servicemembers, two participants, Chris (51, white, cisgender) and Michael (61, African-American, cisgender) served as gay men. There were also a few post-“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” perspectives: Philip, (38, Black, cisgender) spoke of a cringey workplace incident that transpired while at the shooting range:

Just this last week—we hadn’t been to work since mid-March, and we had like a three-day range out there just shooting, shooting, shooting, taking direction from this guy, a retired Special Forces guy. So very alpha-male. And he was explaining something to us and he said “Oh, that’s so gay, such and such is just so gay,” and then he was like “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have used that term,” and everybody chuckles.

As someone who has been discriminated against by these same so-called “alpha male” individuals I was both astonished (because of the sting of the memory that the new incident

recalls) and not surprised (because, of course!). When I inquired as to his response and whether or not he took issue with the instructor's statement and/or similar statements, he replied:

I don't—so even in situations like that when we're shooting and what we're doing is supposed to be very masculine. Um, different tactics to kill the enemy, as the guy would say, it's one of those things. I don't feel like it's a problem—I don't ever feel uncomfortable in those types of situations.

I was struck by the terminology Philip used, phrases like “very masculine, emphasizing ‘shooting’ upwards of six times, finding euphemisms to describe ‘different tactics to kill the enemy’”—all of this war language to describe that which he claimed not to be bothered by—or was he glorifying it? It's also worth noting that both Chris and Phillip made similar statements regarding being openly gay or lesbian and its hinderance with professional development and networking despite having served on opposite sides of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy. Ashely (31, cisgender, mixed-race Latina) spoke of her seven years in the Army with mixed feelings. While she enjoyed her career, she was adamant that it was “still a boys club,” which she also noted was true of the various veterans organizations of the area. These stories paint a somewhat different portrait of life in the military post-DADT, one that defies the rosy, welcoming workforce one might expect given that queer rights have, as it were, been won. Further, as Massey and Nair conclude, to “add to all this the discrimination faced by most trans people and the fundamental gender inequality in the military, where women are still considered disposable sexual objects, alongside ongoing issues like racism and mental health concerns. The result is a toxic environment that makes already vulnerable trans soldiers even more susceptible to social, cultural, and mental crises,” (Massey & Nair, 2018). If these are commonplace anecdotes from the workplace culture for queer people *inside* the military, where the Big Melting Pot supposedly allows for the equalization of all identities under Uncle Sam, what does this mean for queer people *outside* of this institution? “One may wonder whether the equal right to be mistreated and subjugated in a violent, hierarchical institution is worth fighting for,” (Ibid).

Jared (21, Indigenous, cisgender, of Lumberton—Robeson County) relayed a harrowing encounter about receiving threats of violence while managing a fast-food restaurant. Similarly, Zach (19, Indigenous, Two-Spirit, of Fairmont—Robeson County) also reported incidents of being called faggot and having food thrown at them during their tenure as a fast-food employee. Other participants spoke of microaggressions and heteronormativity as a difficult but not uncommon aspect of workplace culture. These more subtle acts of discrimination might not involve getting faggot screamed in one's face but living one's lifestyle openly might be a deterrent to advancement at the workplace. Michael (61, Black, and cisgender, of Fayetteville--Cumberland County) indicated that the combination of being Black and queer is more than enough to keep him from being promoted into a position of power at the community college where he has been employed for over a decade. None of the high-level administrators are queer and there is only one person of color. Wallace (63, Asian-American, cisgender, of Fayetteville--Cumberland) spoke to similar underrepresentation at the community college in which he is employed, even speaking to rumors that the president of the college has “an intense dislike of African-Americans and gays.”

Celine, of Pembroke (Robeson County) and Southern Pines (Moore County), who is 21, Black, and cisgender, described an experience in which a homophobic remark was directed not toward her, but rather a coworker:

Some people have had their junk to talk. One time I had a comment made to me about some of our coworkers, like ‘why is there so many gay people in here?’, because a lot of the cooks are gay. That’s probably the craziest thing I’ve heard at the job. One of the managers stepped in immediately and said, ‘I’m not here for that,’ which I wasn’t expecting.

Celine expressed that she understood immediately that the coworker who made the remark to her about the gay cooks assumed that she was heterosexual. She also understood the significance (and arguably, *serendipity*) of another coworker speaking out in defense of the queer people

there. However, the instances in which straight people use their privilege to speak up and out against queermisia on the job site remain inconsistent.

Several more spoke to a reluctance to express themselves openly at work for fear of ostracization, even reprisal. To reiterate, it is often in the industries and at the establishments where there is the least amount of government oversight and/or labor oversight (retail, food service, meatpacking, etc) and thus where workers are the most vulnerable to exploitation, and this vulnerability falls along the same socio-economic axes of sexuality, race, gender, class, etc. Spencer (22, white, cisgender, of Southern Pines--Moore County), described a vexing encounter with a supervisor at his new job in food service:

I just started, this past week has been my first week, but the very first day I was in training one of the managers was talking and telling the story about how she wanted to name her son a certain name and how her ex-husband wouldn't allow it. He said it was a faggot-name.

Understandably, the power imbalance combined with such an inflammatory statement would be enough to make any employee feel vulnerable; one wonders who he would have reported this behavior to when the language came *from* a manager. Despite the variances in race, gender identity, and age, what unites the aforementioned examples is the relative comfort with which coworkers voiced their homophobic/transphobic opinions. Given the treatment of majority white insurrectionists at the Capitol on 6 January, it is not difficult to telescope this deference to white supremacy across multiple scales. While these and other forms of hostility and aggression towards queer people are often part and parcel to our existence regardless of location, they are eased by the presence of community, and often, the congregation with other queer people.

CHAPTER VI: “AT THIS POINT ITS SORT OF CARVING OUR OWN SPACE OF WHATS AVAILABLE TO US”: CLAIMING SPACE IN THE PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL REALMS?

We have previously surveyed how physical spaces like queer community centers, bookstores, cafes, bars, fitness centers—virtually any physical space designated specifically for queer people—have long been aggregators of services, networking, information, and chosen family in established queer neighborhoods throughout the United States (Levine, 1977; Escoffier, 1998; Ghaziani, 2014). There is nothing remotely comparable in this field site; no bars, no bookstores, no cafes, no community center. Further, unlike the array of commercial establishments and services to be found in a typical urban queer enclave, the queer spaces that exist in this field site could be considered the antithesis of a Gayborhood; they have been fleeting, impermanent, and, most crucially, do not advertise themselves as queer. To reiterate: as it stands, there is currently no self-identifying, marketed, exclusively-queer establishment of any kind in this region. Often, when I asked participants to give me a sense of the queer community here, this void of brick-and-mortar spots for queer people to congregate was one of the primary qualms. For example, Roger (31, Black, cisgender) noted that the queer community of the Fort Bragg region:

was very hidden I can't even tell you the name of the gay bar that was there and then it shut down shortly after I left but I remember you know obviously coming of age and meeting other gay men are either in the military or not but there really wasn't much of a sense of community.

Brandon (28, Black & Lumbee, cisgender) was even more blunt:

There is none. No official queer or LGBT anything; there is not in Robeson County, to my knowledge. There is none in Hoke County, to my knowledge. There was nothing in Fayetteville but then the Pride Board got assembled, and we have put on the Pride Festival, and we had 5,000 people show up last year, so now we know there is a need right, and so that's-- that's huge. But recently in the past few years there was nothing, no club, no official bar, nothing.

Lindsey (28, white, cisgender) also of a queer community that was difficult to locate:

Well, um, most of my experience it took me a long time to find the queer community in Fort Bragg Fayetteville and it really you know it wasn't till I was probably 15 or 16 started going out to places that some of my friends are going and a lot of that revolved around music, either at The Rock Shop or some of the smaller venues where some of the indie-type bands would play. That's where I found people that I could connect with, I obviously wasn't old enough to go to any gay bars. I remember girls, you know, desperately trying to find a girlfriend. And even now I'm in some LGBTQ groups on Facebook and you see posts all the time people in Fayetteville, 'hey I'm in Fayetteville, is anybody else in Fayetteville, where do you go in Fayetteville?' So there is, definitely, you know, there is some challenge in that area to find and connect with other people. But there's also the side that feels like, you know, we're not wanted here so we're kind of angry.

In keeping with the chapter theme of carving space, of taking the proverbial crumbs, some of the following establishments are places that certain queer people go to, but that do not show any identifiable targeting (in the way of marketing and advertisements) of queer clientele (even as an aside to clienteles of other identities).

Jack's Tap (Fayetteville—Cumberland County)



Figure 14-Exterior of Jack's Tap, as seen on VisitFayettevilleNC, 2020.

One such location in Fayetteville, a bar called Jack's Tap on Fort Bragg Road, seems to be one of the only establishments oriented towards a queer clientele, although, if anything, the edifice exudes nondescript, heterosexual sports bar. Those participants who had frequented this

establishment did not feel like the space represented them so much as the “Masc-4-Masc Gays,” as Val (32, Mexican/Latinx, nonbinary) called them, meaning queer men on dating apps who screen their potential hookups by a certain (perceived) universal masculine presentation. There are understandable tensions as to why these types of spaces being the *only* queer venue in town; what of those who are unable or unwilling to fit into certain gendered/racialized parameters? One size does not fit all in the queer spectrum, so it follows that one or two discreet, “respectable” bars would be insufficient to cater to the litany of queer customers in a region that is only going to get more populous.

Dirtbag Ale’s (Hope Mills—Cumberland County)



Figure 15-Dirtbag Ale's, Fayetteville Observer, 2019.

A brewery, bar, and restaurant in Hope Mills, close to the Interstate 95 extension, and founded by a racially diverse group of Army veterans. Despite its obvious heterosexuality, I included this establishment because multiple participants spoke of the drag brunches held there. As this is not a common occurrence in the American South, my interest was naturally piqued, and a tour of their website was illuminating. Their site seems well-maintained, all of the links are valid. One can view the story of the brewery and its employees, along with information concerning events past and forthcoming. Curiously, nowhere is there any mention of drag brunches. I do not include this caveat to impugn the veracity of my participants' claims, merely to illustrate that these findings raise (at least in me) more questions. The most obvious: why go out of the way to include details about other types of live events held there, from music to yoga, without including a decidedly unique event like a drag brunch? Would that not put your establishment on the radar of queer people, who might come and spend their queer dollars? Is it a marketing/business oversight or is it a risk for a brewery to advertise itself as occasionally holding a queer-themed event? Speculative though it may be, for queer people, maybe especially those being radicalized in their graduate programs, these are questions that can enter our thoughts without invitation.

Of the participants who did go out in this area to find queer community, those were two of what this region has to offer. Of course, when I spoke to participants throughout the summer there were various Covid restrictions in place so no one was going out, as it were. Some went out of town to Raleigh, Charlotte, Wilmington, or beyond to get their fulfillment of queer nightlife. In a region where an ongoing complaint among longtime residents is the lack of "things to do," many queer people will go out with groups of cishet friends to cishet coded spaces when faced with another Saturday night at home. A desire to fit in can mute, maybe even eventually completely eradicate a desire for a place for one's own community, but assimilation can never be completed because queerness is inherently incongruent with the desired identity. And while it might be another matter if these efforts and resources were not impeding radical change, the existence of neoliberal activist praxis is fundamentally at odds with addressing the root causes of inequality.

This phenomenon is not merely an absence of *commercial* spaces, rather, this utter lack of queer-centered organizations is also an *institutional* problem, even in venues of higher learning.

For example, neither Sandhills Community College, in Moore County, Fayetteville Technical Community College, in Cumberland County, nor Robeson County Community College have dedicated queer support groups. For students like Spencer (22, white, cisgender) efforts to create his own [queer] lane was met with casual indifference from the administration at Sandhills Community College. “Professors did not want to go out of their way to do anything they didn't necessarily have to. So, I was able to create a training type of thing, similar to Safe Zone. Myself and my advisor created like a basic LGBTQ+ terminology and delivered it to the faculty but the president of the college refused to make it mandatory. All they needed to do with it was essentially press a button, because they already had the training available to them, they just didn't make it active.” While Spencer was eventually able to form a queer support group, he noted that regular attendance did not reflect the number of actual queer students there, the majority of whom he characterized as “severely closeted.” For queer people who live here, a void of physical queer space results in a hyperdependence on the digital space and within this space cultural conservatism is reinscribed.

What is the opposite of hip to the game? That was me when it came to being on the cusp of technology, especially smart phones. I was still working retail at the time and so extra money was not a common occurrence. I was the last of my friend group to get a smart phone, but when I eventually purchase my first iPhone and started putting myself out there, it is difficult to describe the euphoria I felt from finally finding a semblance of queer community. Not only that but using it for the first time while I was still living in Delaware, as it were, I had never had people really openly express their interest in me, whatever it may be. And there were so many men close to me! Leaving New Castle, Delaware to return home to Raeford, North Carolina in the summer of 2015, I was equally astonished by the seeming devolution in mentality I encountered on the apps between the two locales.

Throughout this essay thus far we have surveyed how, in the Fort Bragg region, conservative culture and the economic domination of the defense economy combine to shape the ways queer spaces do/do not materialize and it is linked to a nationalism that is more tolerant of some queer people than others. As Jasbir Puar suggests: “U.S. patriotism momentarily sanctions some homosexualities, often through gendered, racial, and class-sanitizing, in order to produce ‘monster-terrorist-fags’; homosexuals embrace the us-versus-them rhetoric of U.S. patriotism and thus align themselves with this racist and homophobic production.” (Puar, 2007, p. 46). Homonormative performativity, such as the ingratiation of white queer people into occupations like the military or the police, the reorienting of queer politics “from Stonewall to the suburbs,” is discernible if one knows how and where to look for it. One can log onto Grindr in the rural southeast to see how nonwhite (no Blacks/no Asians, it’s just a preference); no femmes (REAL MEN ONLY); and certain body shapes (no overweight/fat, only people who take care of themselves) have penetrated our community, as will be discussed more in the section on digital spaces (Agathangelou, et al, 2008, p. 124). Moreover, for those who have not only been seduced by these tenets of empire but ascribe to them openly and only visit our queer community when the (physical) need suits them, the question remains whether they should be considered part of our community altogether. For those people, there is no need for an autonomously queer space,

perhaps not even a queer community. They can maneuver throughout the world with less (or perhaps no) chance of being accosted because they don't present as queer and/or divergent from the gender they were assigned at birth, thus enabling assimilation, if so desired. If the socio-economic strata with the resources and the *attention* of the community does not desire a service (or space) the dynamics of the so-called free market dictate that said service (or space) will not materialize.

And so it is, there are few physical spaces for us to congregate. Naturally, people who do not have or do not want that option desire another recourse, and they react to this dearth of the physical by filing into the digital space. Since 2009, Grindr, for better or worse, has been a key component of community between queer men. It is considered the quintessential gay men's hookup app, although it is also used by queer men of multiple overlapping identities, such as trans men and women as well as bisexual men. Grindr is also a site for the infamous "headless torso" or "blank profile" that is the stereotype for closeted men who are super discreet. Grindr is perhaps one of the simplest ways to find someone to hookup with in any locale, but here, it is one of the oldest digital means of communicating with area queer people. One participant said that if it weren't for Grindr, they wouldn't know there were any queer people around them.

The list has since grown to include apps like Tinder or Bumble that support a litany of options based on gender identity and screening based on the type of interaction one is seeking. Most of these applications make use of a global positioning system (GPS) that arrays users on a grid-like apparatus from which they can select an individual to interact with. There has been much discussion about the supposed ills of these apps and the interactions on these apps. Some foresee digital spaces like Grindr as the end of the Gayborhood because of the supposed lack of human interaction (Norman, 2015). Others, such as neoliberal psychiatrists (sound familiar?) like Jack Turban speculate as to the impact of Grindr on bringing gay relationships into the mainstream because users might become less interested in monogamous relationships, even become sex

addicts (Turban, 2018). Listed below are a few of the mobile apps, digital, and online spaces used by many of the queer participants of the Fort Bragg region, though this is by no means an exhaustive list.

“LGBTQ NC”

This was one of the only Facebook group spoken acknowledged by participants; both Ashley (31, Indigenous-Taino, cisgender) and Lindsey (28, white, cisgender) were members and very graciously vouched for me when I made recruitment posts during the summer of 2020. None of the recruitment efforts made there ever came to fruition. Regrettably, it has either been deactivated or has been made unsearchable, a common tactic implemented by Facebook groups whose administrators have capped the membership and/or fear retribution from Facebook censors and/or those who would potentially report and/or censor their content. It’s also possible that the group disbanded after it was changed from “LGBTQ NC” to “LGBTQ NC & SC,” which might have put off members who desired membership to be exclusive to North Carolinians only. Not wanting to prejudge, I nonetheless couldn’t help but note the pinned post from one of the administrators reiterating a rule prohibiting political posts. While this paraphrasing does not do justice to the actual post,

“Out & About Fayetteville”

According to the About section of this private Facebook group, “The purpose of Out & About Fayetteville is to connect members of the LGBTQ community living in Fayetteville, North

Carolina. This group is meant to help find and make friends in the community or to seek help. This is not meant for hookups or self-promotion. There are other apps for those things.” Until (and if) my membership request is accepted, it is difficult to determine the group dynamics or organizational praxis. It is comprised of close to 400 members, and although the privacy settings will not allow non-members to survey the membership, I can see the two administrators, none of whom are known to me.

In terms of tracking and cataloguing, these digital apps and spaces can also be a moving target based on some of the aforementioned factors: popularity of the space, harmony of the group members (or lack thereof); surveillance by culturally insensitive social media moderators; the list is innumerable. Regardless, in this digital age, and in a region where choice is not a luxury everyone can afford, there *is* something to be said about being able to communicate with other queer people from the comfort (and safety) of one’s own home, regardless of geography. Indeed, in rural areas that never had or no longer have the socio-economic infrastructure that is concomitant with traditional queer enclaves, digital spaces can be the only means of finding community with queer people, both local and otherwise. Out of 28 participants, virtually all had had some experience with queer apps as sources of dating and community, and over half indicated they were quite necessary even simply for locating other queer people in the area. As with one’s experience of moving about in physical spaces, experiences in the digital realm vary based on race, sexuality, gender identity, class, and ability. Taylor (26, white, cisgender) specifically noted different gendered experiences that transcended the physical and digital:

I know like four people off the top of my head right now that I work with, or they’re friends with those people that I work with currently, they’re in the closet but like they have a whole wife and boyfriend. And it’s just like, you know, the only way to do it anonymously is online, and not even if you’re not doing anonymously, doing very privately. And like I said, women are more accepted because I can both look feminine and it’s a turn on for many men, so it doesn’t get too hated on. So you have women who bump into each other and oh that’s attractive. Like when I met my wife I mean it really got in the Texas Roadhouse. Men that knew we were dating were into it because like it’s ‘two hot girls,’ right.

Wallace (63, Asian-American, cisgender) noted that for elders in the community, digital queer spaces can be “lifelines for those experiencing loneliness and isolation,” even before various incarnations of shelter-in-place/quarantine/lockdown in this time of Covid-19. The fact that most rural American towns *don't* have legitimate queer spaces to foster community seems lost on many queer intellectuals as they lecture us on the deviant properties of dating apps. For example, as someone who assures us that he is in fact all for sexual liberation, Jack Turban's 2018 *Vox* article “We need to talk about how Grindr is affecting gay men's mental health” constructs an odd and misleading narrative.

Some of the data sets he references, such as the ratings from the Time Well Spent survey, a study on app ratings conducted by the Center for Humane Technology, leave little room for nuance in terms of how ratings are qualified, not to mention the higher rates of dissatisfaction among other common apps that he neglects to address. For example, while Grindr is number one for unhappiness, so is Tinder, along with two different variations of the game Candy Crush. The point is, queer people becoming addicted and depressed by these apps is, naturally, a mental health problem that should be remedied. Apps, be they dating, social media, or gaming, can certainly lead to addictive behaviors and depressed moods based on how we use them but also our body chemistries. When used mindfully, apps like Tinder and Grindr can be positive methods of social interaction, and most crucially, are some of the only methods of community available to many queer people. This extremely narrow view of the efficacy of such apps is part and parcel of the neoliberal attitudes dominating scholarship of queer geographies that continue to overlook the experiences of non-urban queer others.

Irrespective of their effect, these digital queer spaces are an apt model for what Ash et al describe as the ways in which digital geography reshapes many geographies, mediates the production of geographic knowledge, and itself has many geographies (Ash, et al, 2018, p. 35). Here, in the digital realm, one encounters these same stifling, even disciplinary parameters on queerness.

This could manifest as screening potential hookups by physicality. Val, (32, Mexican/Latinx, nonbinary) put it bluntly: “On the apps, people harass me just out of nowhere. A few times I’ve been told that I shouldn’t be on there, that I’m TFTF, which means “too fat to fuck.” These shocking displays of cruelty are not relegated to physicality, but also possess similar racial connotations mirrored in the corporeal realm. Malik (29, Black, cisgender) has observed racialized screenings in a regional Facebook group for non-monogamous gay male couples: “Within this Facebook group for non-monogamous couples, the only people bringing up those racial preferences are cisgender white men. It’s really interesting to watch because the gay white men don’t understand why the gay men of color are saying that this is actually a problem.”

The mindless deference to whiteness and a certain sculpted physique, particularly in gay male culture, has been well-documented in myriad locales through anthologies like *Black Men/White Men; In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*; and *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (Smith, 1983) (Beam, 1986) (Hemphill, 1991). Yet, some locals think these mentalities are especially prevalent in the Fort Bragg region. Jared (21, Indigenous, cisgender, of Lumberton, in Robeson County) maintained that “certain types of people being exclusionary on these apps are so used to having access to other queer people through these apps that they don't think twice about excluding people from talking to them or being in their dating pool. They don't even see guys like me. I'm just feminine enough and also, I'm not thin, and I'm not white. I don't wanna be those things, but they don't even see me because that's kind of the worldview that they're trying to keep.” What he is speaking to corresponds to how Puar conceptualizes the alignment of “momentarily sanction[ed]” homosexualities whose acceptability fall along race, gender, and class (Puar, 2007, p. 46). Digital queer spaces like LGBTQ+ NC that espouse a supposed apoliticism by censoring and/or prohibiting posts about religion and politics only serve to reinforce oppression by delimiting queer expression. Apoliticism in queer spaces is a problem because our existence as queer people is *inherently political* and continues to be politicized.

Society and technology have evolved to the degree that digital spaces like Tinder and Grindr are possible, where shows like *Drag Race* are possible, but this representation needs to be concomitant with complete liberation for all queer people. And despite the frequent violence one can encounter in these digital spaces, they are nonetheless *crucial* to the formation of queer community in this study area. What can we glean about the trajectory of queerness within an area whose economic, social, and political cornerstone, its *raison d'être*, stems from an institution whose business is surveillance, occupation, and execution?

CHAPTER VIII: CONCLUSION: IMAGINING A RADICAL QUEER COMMUNITY

Catherine Lutz challenges us to ask ourselves how it is that we (the collective American *we*, not merely the Eastern North Carolina *we*) have come to live in a society “made by war and preparations for war...What would America be like today if, at the least, the elites who opt for war had made other choices?” (Lutz, 2001, p. 9). The Fort Bragg region exemplifies the ways in which institutions like the military can imprint onto the landscape. Despite strides in the visibility of queerness in the way of Pride events and queer civil society groups, queer identity and queer space in the Fort Bragg region seemingly remain contingent on how they align with gendered, racialized, and nationalized norms; a palatable queerness. Queer identity here is a construction of/spatially constituted by these issues. The narrative of queer people as resilient and surviving in these spaces should not be misconstrued with *thriving* or in these spaces, being *liberated* in these spaces. And the stories of these 28 individuals, as well as my own, allow us to glimpse into a world that, for all intents and purposes, entrenched and circumscribed by militarism and conservative socio-economic ideologies. Amidst this unique cultural topography, we have charted new formations of decades-old patterns of thought and activism whose visions of equality do not challenge the structural and institutional barriers to queer liberation, such as militarism, imperialism, and capitalism. Still, queer people are also showing agency and resiliency, as we always have done, despite an outside world that is hostile to us; we’re still here. We are teachers in the classrooms during the week; sitting in the pews at church on Sunday. Queer people carve out space for themselves at the card shop or the bookstore because there is no queer card shop or queer bookstore; there is no well-funded, well-marketed business organization rushing to facilitate these needs. It’s not a fundraising priority at the Chamber of Commerce meeting.

Despite the military installation itself being barely a century old, it seems to have almost taken on an atemporal quality. It occupies so much of the present that one cannot conceive of a time, past or future, without it. For these reasons, it is inconceivable that its influence could or should

be tailored. But make no mistake, to continue to aspire and operate within the diversity, equity, and inclusion framework that seeks integration within this and similarly socially, politically, and environmentally deleterious institutions, is to continue to follow a false scent. On a national scale, the Business Party and the Biden Administration has given no indication of plans to disengage from the imperial project anytime soon, and so it will be just as vital to hold our state, regional, and local queer organizations accountable. In terms of what spaces and places exist for queer people in the Fort Bragg region, we can and must do better, and the local and regional scales will . For radical queer people of this region who want to “get more involved” but are reticent to cast our lot with the existing neoliberal activism structure, what is our recourse? As Agathangelou et al reason, “If it is true that our deepest desires, feelings, and arousals are tapped into for imperial production, it also becomes crucial to ask how we might organize, mobilize, and form alternative intimacies and desires,” (Agathangelou, et al, 2008, p. 139). We must begin to visualize and create a society, a type of queer politics, that enables people to thrive where they are, not just in the digital closet, which is hardly a queer utopia.

So what is to be done? Again, it is through queer of color critique and women of color feminism that we can begin to chart a path forward to, if not utopia, but imagined futures. Further, this cultural topography delineates a set of critical points within which individuals and groups seeking to transform dominant and oppressive powers can constitute themselves as resistant and oppositional citizen-subjects,” (Sandoval and Davis, 2000, p. 53). To that end, it means deploying Differential Consciousness to assess the needs of queer people by meeting them where they are. Addressing the material needs across spatial divides--in the way of progressive healthcare, access to safe and affordable housing; workplace protections, yes, but workplace protections at *well-paying, ethical, environmentally-conscious enterprises*—as well as the cultural needs—shoring up queer community by teaching queer theory in a reading group; starting a queer community garden; offering to help a queer elder with a household chore, or simply spending time with them—all worthwhile endeavors that don’t involve reinforcing cishet, militaristic, capitalist norms. It means harnessing organizational power to pressure local

politicians and regional bodies to implement non-reformist reforms and policy—helping our queer family on the inside of the prison-industrial complex, not planning queer events at golf resorts. Striving towards a radical queer community means casting off the camouflaged oppressor and coalescing around a progressive, sustainable, restorative queer praxis.

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