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The southern United States is known for being historically and contemporarily religious and conservative. This study seeks to investigate the many ways that queer individuals navigate and degrees of safety individuals feel when embodying their identities in these spaces. Temporary pockets of safe space can be created by individuals in various geographic locations to serve as a means of feeling like a valid human being while inhabiting a minority status. It is hypothesized in this paper that these spaces are vital to the continued living, working, and learning of individuals as they provide temporary relief of dichotomous pressure of dominate society while allowing the individual to embody their identities as they deem appropriate. This study encompasses narratives from three queer people living in North Carolina and uses the narratives in combination with social theory to illuminate queer lives in the southern United States.

NAVIGATING SOUTHERN SPACES: QUEER NARRATIVES FROM BELOW THE
MASON DIXON

by

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To my loving significant other, Brittany and my eternally supportive family.
Finally, to Alex, Taylor, and Sophia - thank you for opening yourself up and letting me
into a part of your lives.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Caitlin A. Armer 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

We weren't really meant to survive, I think. As queer people. My existence is an act of defiance. My existence is an act of retribution, of resistance. And being in the south and being in my family... Well, it's not easy.

What does it mean to embody an identity that falls outside of normative definition in an area that is historically religious and conservative? Narratives of the civil war, fried okra, Freedom Riders, sweet tea, the King James Bible, and hundreds more anecdotes create the contemporary south. How do all these ideas, these real and idealized concepts culminate to create the southern spaces some of us now navigate? And what does this combination mean for queer bodies in those spaces?

“Queer” is often used as an umbrella term for any individual identifying within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender plus (LGBTQ+) community. However, queer has evolved into an identity with more flexibility and mobility for those who try it on and find a good fit. “Being ‘queer’, then, is perhaps to be like someone in therapy; that is, to be a person in flux, contesting boundaries, eliding definition and exhibiting the constructedness of categorization” (Watson, 2005). As astutely pointed out by Katherine Watson, queer has transformed into an identity that allows for fluidity and impulses, accounts for space, and encompasses (if the individual sees fit) more than sexuality solely. Queer can contest binary boundaries from various standpoints -

heterosexual/homosexual, male/female, monogamous/polyamorous, sexual/asexual. It disrupts the normative definitions of gender, sexuality, and ways of being in the world and allows the individual to envision other ways of being.

Through this version of queer ideology, contemporary lexicon is growing at a rapid rate to include various bodies and identities. Identities such as gender-queer, gender variant, non-binary, agender, bi-gender, gender fluid, two-spirit, pansexual, asexual, intersex, transgender, transmasculine, transfeminine, and host of others are becoming more visible in academic literature, even though they have been present in LGBTQ+ communities for years and in other cultures for centuries¹. As these identities gain more visibility in non-LGBTQ+ spaces, there is a push back from dominate cultural norms to keep the status quo (See section four: House Bill 2). It is in spaces that adhere strongly to normalized dichotomous identities that the push back is the fiercest. In response to the General Assembly of North Carolina's decision to pass House Bill 2², nine southern states introduced numerous anti-LGBTQ+ bills³. Several bills were vetoed or died, while some were too broadly written to pass (Sturgis 2016). It is in these areas that the safety and well-being of queer individuals should be promoted and widely encouraged. When state and local governments are charged with keeping its constituents safe and to represent them justly fail so miserably to do so special attention must be paid to ensure the well-being of queer individuals. In this particular study, to southern queer individuals.

¹ Two-spirit individuals used to be seen as shamans or priests in their communities who were charged with leading various communing ceremonies. However, with the introduction of Christianity and Western ideologies, two-spirit individuals who are living traditionally Native American as facing homophobia from their own tribes. (Sheppard and Mayo, 2013)

² Legislation requiring individuals to use the bathroom that represents their biological sex rather than gender identity created in response to the City of Charlotte passing an anti-discrimination ordinance in 2015, allowing bathroom usage based on gender identity. (North Carolina General Assembly, 2016)

³ Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia (Sturgis 2016)

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Space and Place

“Embodied space” is a uniquely interesting concept brought to life by Setha Low (2003). It is a reconceptualization of space as movement rather than a stagnant, geographic location where human interaction occurs. Low places emphasis on the melding of theoretical groundings and experience driven understanding. An embodied space is one where human consciousness takes on spatial form; meaning that a place is imbued with social, historical, and cultural meaning because meaning is assigned to it through the creation of the conscious spatial form. Furthermore, this allows for individuals to have unique experiences within the same spaces that are perceived differently. “People not only structure spaces but experience them differently and inhabit distinct sensory worlds” (13). A violent example: The Stonewall Riot in 1969. The police raided the Stonewall Inn in New York City during an attempted seizure of the bar. Fights broke out between police and patrons (Carter, 2004). In the same geographic location (the Stonewall Inn), the patrons structured the space creating a gay bar in the experiencing, embracing, and performing of sexuality and gender. Simultaneously, police were retaliating with violence sanctioned by the local government and police department. Both sensory worlds perceived and acted upon on the basis of the perception of the individual.

Low continues beyond the broader concept of embodied space to “moving spatial field,” which simply is understood as a human being making their own place in the world. She suggests

that as each individual navigates various social scenes throughout society that they take with them a moving spatial field. It is through this field that spaces are embedded with social and historical significance and meaning. This concept expands Edward Hall's studies in proxemics; the study of people's many and varying uses of space as a working cog of culture (Low 2003 and Hall 1968). Hall envisions a sort of bubble akin to the way personal space is thought of contemporarily in Western culture. The body is the epicenter of societal interaction within the bubble containing the individual's perceptions. The conclusion of Hall's work is that any universal assumption applied to shared human experience will ultimately misrepresent spatial relations (1968). That is to say, that without consideration of the individual, research surrounding space and place is not valid. Generalized interpretations do not allow for a precise analysis of human/spatial relations.

Queering Space

Mary Gray's book "Out in the Country" gives a unique perspective on queer youth carving out spaces in rural communities where they can embody varying identities. Gray presents the argument that rather than being inherently negative for queer individuals, as much of the current research suggests, rural spaces present different challenges than that of their urban counterparts. It is important to note such a fact when considering the safety of various bodies in southern spaces. Gray utilizes a variety of qualitative techniques to gather her data including participant observation and interviewing which allowed her access to these temporary queered spaces. She explores the idea of space as being momentarily queered, an example - at a local music venue that often hosts rock shows, where youth can come together to live out and experience sexuality and gender however they see fit. This is also the key difference in the rural versus urban space. Urban places often have clubs and organizations dedicated to LGBTQ+ individuals and rural places, more often, do not. The converted space of niche rurality is a

creative, locational specific way of existing. These are the times when participants feel the most accepted and safe.

What could be viewed as a partner piece with Gray's book - Lesley Marple's article *Rural Queers? The Loss of the Rural in Queer*. In her opening paragraph Marple calls for a shift of perception of the rural queer from patronized to empowered (2005). She reinforces Gray's ideas about the ways urban spaces are created through organizations and visibility of queer individuals, and that queer space must be redefined to include the rural queer as an active participant rather than a discounted perspective. Marple also draws attention to another important concept, the idea of being "out." Oftentimes, being out seems to be the end of the journey or the destination for an LGBTQ+ person. However, this does not account for the place or space that the person occupies. If the area that the individual resides in is particularly conservative and/or religious, there might be very good reason for the person to choose not to disclose their identities publicly. This does not make them any less of a queer person. When residing in rural places community involvement is paramount to daily life. Employment, family relations, and community status are something that rural queer individuals must consider when disclosing their identities to whomever they choose. The urban, just as being out, is the presumed ultimate goal or destination in the LGBTQ+ community (Gray 2009, Marple 2005, Yarbrough 2003). Being born and raised in a rural area is assumed stifling and violent, conversely moving to a city is the best chance of an open life. However, both of these authors are making the case that the rural has not been given proper credit for the different types of opportunities it allows for its queer citizens, and does not give any credit to those rural queers for the creative ways of being and existing.

When framing perceptions of self in terms of space and place it is important to consider the ways that geographic area and the norms of that area effect one's identity. Steven Holloway's article *Identity, Contingency, and Urbane Geography Culture of Race* provides a snapshot of how

urban spaces inform race, specifically, but identity as a whole (2000). He is reworking the way that urban geographers categorize people. He states that it is violent to categorize individuals in such a way that their actual identities are lost. Sociology often ranks identities in hierarchical manner (Valocchi 2005). In doing so the same violence is inflicted upon the individual. Though this is the methods that the academy employs, being aware of the limitations this act puts upon research is necessary to acknowledge. Additionally, Holloway considers the ways group identities influence individual identity. In what ways are the people a human being surrounds themselves with shaping, changing, or creating the way that human being perceives their own existence in the world. In thinking about temporarily queering spaces, do the individuals in need of that safe space surrounded by like-minded people who will aid in the creation of that space? Identity is a multifaceted being with layers upon layers and none of them existing the same without the other. How does the physical space that these layers exist effect the ties between them? Holloway argues that “identity formation is deeply embedded within urban geographic contexts – the groups that interact within particular geographic contexts, neighborhoods for example, form the frame of reference for identity construction” (1999). This most certainly extends beyond the city limits into rural and less populated areas.

Emiel Maliepaard takes Holloway’s framework and specifies it to only look at bisexual individual’s experiences (2015). This is important because he makes the case that the spaces a person inhabits directly affect whether or not an individual will reveal specific parts of their identity. This can be applied to small town places and atmospheres where there is an emphasis on community and most people know one another (Gray 2005). Maliepaard goes on to discuss the sexual coding of space and how individuals negotiate their identities as sexual subjects. Perhaps most importantly, he draws attention to the ways that queer theory does not account for space/place. As Holloway astutely pointed out, identity formation is far too complex to not

account for geographic location and/or physical space. By invoking interdisciplinary tactics, we may begin to create new and unique frameworks that assist us in thinking and talking about social research.

It is that interdisciplinary stance that Kath Browne takes when writing about queer spaces. The cultivation of queer space, even if it is only temporary, relies on the naming of the space as queer. Browne states that dominant thought is that sexualized space is in flux between dichotomous roles; between homosexual and heterosexual, between male and female (2006). Most space is assumed heterosexual, as the normalized category of sexual being that is only transformed by visible queer bodies occupying the space. Browne questions how researchers might (re)think, (re)write, and (re)configure dialogue surrounding spaces and bodies without reifying normalized categories. This is not a new concept within feminist work (Puar, Halberstam). However, challenging and contesting what constitutes as “queer” is particularly thought provoking. Does queer space only exist when visibly read queer bodies are occupying? Browne argues that queer is no longer an overarching category for LGBTQ+ individuals, but queer as something that attempts to find and illuminate inconsistencies of social norms and limitations. When Mary Gray outlines the rock shows in small town Kentucky and labels it temporarily queer, she is employing this contestation against the social norms and their limitation that Browne is pointing out. Though Browne would argue that Gray is falling into the trap of labelling and naming. However, both points provide varying perspectives that help shape dominant theory.

The South

Since the United States Supreme Court ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2016), nationally overturning bans on same sex marriage, anti-LGBTQ+ laws have been cropping up across the country with the south being a forerunner in that race. According to the Human Rights Campaign

and the Institute for Southern Studies, 200 anti-LBTQ+ bills have been introduced in 34 states (Sturgis and Human Rights Campaign, 2016). States include, but are not limited to: Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, West Virginia, Virginia, and Kentucky. In most of the aforementioned attempts legislation was successfully thwarted in hearings dedicated to these discriminatory bills. However, few have been made it through the judicial process and are now laws undermining human rights of LGBTQ+ individuals in the various regions in the United States. These areas are specifically in southern states.

On March 23rd of 2016 at exactly 9:57 P.M. Eastern Standard Time the General Assembly of North Carolina signed into law House Bill 2. This law is a two-part legislation that addresses usage of public, single-sex occupancy bathrooms and consistency in employment/wage laws. The former states, “Local boards of education shall require every multiple occupancy bathroom or changing facility that is designed for student use to be designated for and used only by students based on their biological sex” (General Assembly of North Carolina, 2016). This law was drafted in response to Charlotte, North Carolina’s Non-Discrimination Ordinance which gave gender-nonconforming and transgender individuals the right to use the restroom that matched their gender identity rather than their biological sex (City Council of the City of Charlotte, North Carolina, 2015). House Bill 2 reverses any local government’s amendments or laws that extend anti-discrimination rights to its citizens. The bill directly states that The University of North Carolina and the North Carolina Community College System must obey the new law as it overturns any individual policies that universities might already have in place. Additionally, the law states that accommodations will be made for special cases. However, this will not extend rights of transgendered or gender nonconforming individuals to use multiple occupancy, same-sex restrooms.

The second part of House Bill 2 is directed towards businesses who have more than fifteen employees working for them. Section 3.1. G.S. 143-422.2 (a) states, “It is the public policy of this State to protect and safeguard the right and opportunity of all persons to seek, obtain, and hold employment without discrimination or abridgement on account of race, religion, color, national origin, age, biological sex or handicap by employers...” (General Assembly of North Carolina, 2016). Identically to part one, this section also supersedes any measures set by local government or individual universities. This law justifies unnecessary firing or non-hiring of individuals based on gender presentation and sexual orientation. This law allows for institutionalized discrimination against the queer community sanctioned by the state and government of North Carolina.

Residing in historically conservative and religious areas, such as the southern United States, comes with its own unique experience. The Front, a new organization, is dedicated to the use of a wide variety of mediums to capture queer individuals from an ethnographic standpoint. Their online series *New Deep South* spends an episode on one person or a couple who are living in and navigating southern spaces. The first two episodes take place in Jackson and Indianola, Mississippi. The episodes are just a ten to twenty-minute snapshot of a person’s life, but it is so deeply personal and relevant to growing up as a southern queer. From Indianola a teenager has come to terms with being a female-to-male transgender individual, but fears coming out to her father who is deeply religious. She discusses how she is an out, gay male at her high school but no one actually talks about it. In Jackson a couple is trying to have a child but is also dealing with being a cop when police officers are under heavy scrutiny. *New Deep South* depicts the navigation of space but also the humanity in the “other.” There is no naming or labelling by the film crew, as Kath Browne would encourage, but allows the individual to discuss the ways they perceive themselves.

Researchers from the University of South Carolina partnered with a community-based LGBTQ+ center to draft and disperse a needs assessment for LGBTQ+ individuals living in South Carolina (Coleman, Jason D., Jay A. Irwin, Ryan C. Wilson, & Henry C. Miller, 2013). This assessment had several sections regarding various topics to provide thick description of daily life in South Carolina. Topics included employment status, healthcare, education, degree of out-ness, marital or partner status, community engagement and safety. Coleman et al. found that most respondents felt either safe or very safe in the area that they reside in while trusting that law enforcement had their best interests in mind. This goes against much of the other literature surrounding queer individuals in more rural areas. Researchers also found that the majority of respondents report traditional identities (gay or lesbian), are highly educated, and are in committed long term relationships. While identifying with a section of the LGBTQ+ community, the majority of individuals reflected their heterosexual counterparts, which might contribute to the amount of safety they feel. Conversely, roughly forty percent of respondents report that they have endured some degree of hate crime in their lifetime, which is more on par with the literature. Degree of out-ness being measured falls into the troupe of assuming that queer individuals must strive for being out as part of the queer journey. Though most respondents are out to at least one other person, researchers employed convenience sampling and distributed the survey at a South Carolina Pride festival. A queer person attending a public event of this nature is more likely to be comfortable in an openly queer environment.

Darrell G. Yarbrough conducted a similar study in rural Texas. He interviewed eight gay males, ages 18-25 (2003). The qualitative structure of the study allows for themes to emerge from the interviews, which is the focus of his paper. The men that were interviewed shared experiences of coming out, interactions with parents, isolation, and abuse from others. Again, degree of out-ness is a concern for queer individuals in southern, rural areas. Isolation was defined as not

having a queer network for the respondent to seek support from, it also included lack of general queer visibility in the places they reside. It is important to note that degree of out-ness is a pivotal theme when talking with queer people but isolation often comes up as well. Though there is pressure to come out, people often need to safeguard that portion of their identity to maintain safety and wellbeing. When there is no queer presence, it is much more difficult for individuals to subscribe to the queer script of out-ness.

Queering Language

Language is a complex feature of humanity. Who assigns symbols meaning? Who endows words with power? Those who rank among the elite of our societies, those who have been deemed experts in some form or fashion. Words, just like humans, have inceptions and histories. They form and morph through time and space. In the case of the word “queer,” its roots are traced back to sixteenth century Scotland (Sayers, 2005). It surfaced again in Old and Middle Irish as “cuar” meaning crooked, specifically as in the curve of a bow. Sayers states that cuar might have entered the English vernacular through merchants passing throughout Europe at the time. The word survived several iterations, and some scandal⁴, to arrive in the United States in the early 1900’s as an insult for LGBTQ+ people. Contemporarily, the definition of the word queer is still morphing, still fluxing through rhetoric and uprising. It is now a word that the academy, intellectuals, gender outlaws, and communities are attempting to reclaim; to give positive meaning to a previously derogatory term. Now queer is simply one who does not identify within the normalized hetero/homosexual or male/female dichotomy. To be queer is to elude concrete labelling.

⁴ John Sholto Douglas the 9th Marquess of Queensberry, his son Francis Douglas was assumed to have a romantic involvement Archibald Primrose (aka Lord Rosebery), while his other son, Lord Alfred Douglas, was involved with Oscar Wilde. Lord Rosebery died under mysterious circumstances. Shortly after, Wilde was charged and put on trial for sodomy.

It is absolutely critical to be aware of the complications and meanings associated with the language put forth into the academy, and furthermore, into the world. It is perhaps more critical to be aware of language used when thinking about, discussing, and writing about individuals who might flux between identities or reside solely in that space. There is a violence in miss-gendering, miss-labeling, and misunderstanding. “The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak,” (Rorty 1989). Richard Rorty discusses the ways that language only consists of the ways that human beings can describe the world; truth and falsity depend solely on what the dominate human “truth” contains. What does that mean for queer individuals? It means that the word queer and all of the terms associated with the LGBTQ+ community are constructed through means of describing the world. That also means that as the truth changes, as human perception changes, so may the definitions ascribed to those words.

In “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” Judith Butler further cautions the release of new or emerging vocabularies into the world, with particular emphasis into the political sphere (2004). She examines what it means when she claims and discloses that she is a lesbian, what it means to use the marker of lesbian. She argues that once she has released that signifier out into the world that it is out of her control, and that it excludes other facets of her identity immediately. She also delves into out-ness and the act of coming out. “For being ‘out’ always depends to some extent on being ‘in’; it gains its meaning only within that polarity. Hence, being ‘out’ must produce *the closet* again and again in order to maintain itself as ‘out.’ In this sense, *outness* can only produce a new opacity; and the close produces the promise of disclosure that can, by definition, never come” (356). Linguistic concepts exist in opposition, in polarities. Homosexuality can only exist because heterosexuality does; femininity can only exist because masculinity does. The closet paradox that Butler describes pushes the troupe of journeying to

out-ness as necessary to a deeper level of understanding. To say that someone must come out or strive for out-ness to fully embody a queer identity sets the individual up for consistent and constant coming out for the remainder of their lives. The implication of being “in” the closet as a form of hiding or masking parts of an identity is detrimental to the LGBTQ+ person. Butler is not advocating for the removal of this phrase but is encouraging thinking critically about the ways that commonly accepted language affects LGBTQ+ individuals lives and experiences.

In the first chapter of *Undoing Gender*, Butler discusses the ways various people are viewed (or not viewed at all) as non-human due to identifying with and within minorities groups (2005). When people’s identities tread into non-human territories, they cease to viewed as viable human beings by society. Their experiences of loss or love or anger are not valued the same way that human seen counterpart’s are.

Language used in the social sciences and humanities often mirrors that of the hard sciences. Data and numbers are applied to human experiences to help illuminate the varying ways society is navigated. However, Joshua Ferguson challenges this standard in “Queering Methodologies: Challenging Scientific Constraint in the Appreciation of Queer and Trans Subjects” (2013). Ferguson states that setting up human beings as test subjects, rather than the unique individual that they are traps them in “scientific constraint.” What he means by this is that participants are used as fact-based evidence that the researcher then uses to make universal or general statements about a particular type of person, culture, etcetera based on that one person’s experiences and history. Ferguson offers up a working solution to this problem – using several lenses to view each participant and not applying any categories to the individual, just allowing their narratives to speak for themselves. He argues that the long used scientific method is damaging and silencing to queer individuals in that it attempts to trap them in dominant thought and language rather than acknowledging the individual’s identity for what it might be.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The vast majority of research done on queer experience is qualitative in structure. Throughout the literature it is becoming apparent that small pockets of queer communities are scattered around the United States. In urban areas and rural universities these take the form of social and/or cultural groups (Hudson and Self 2015; Teman and Lahman 2012). However, with a lower population comes lower queer visibility (Yarbrough 2013; Marple 2005). Finding generalizable populations to randomly draw from is not a viable means of study when looking into various aspects of queer life. Within those various aspects, quantitative data would not present a full or rich study of what it means to be a queer individual navigating numerous spaces. In-depth interviews done on a person to person basis (Yarbrough 2013). This is the best possible means of conducting this study because it will allow for variables not originally accounted for, and allows the individual to fully realize their own voice in the creation of this research.

The twelve University of North Carolina System schools with active LGBTQ+ organizations were contacted with information regarding the study to procure participants (Hudson and Self 2015; Yarbrough 2013; Teman and Lahman 2012). Public universities in the UNC system were chosen because their students fall within the determined participant parameters. Participants were required to be enrolled in the UNC system, be between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, and identify within the queer community. As this study is focusing on perceptions of personal safety, the North Carolina campus atmosphere is of particular interest. Universities offer a concentrated population with some diversity. Active organizations were asked

to forward a recruitment letter to their members. Members were then free to contact the principle investigator with further questions or to set up an interview, if interested.

Three individuals were interviewed over the course of three months. A small number of participants were chosen so their narratives may provide an in-depth snapshot of queer life on southern college campuses and how those individuals navigate the spaces they inhabit. Each participant offered a unique perspective to a largely unexplored academic territory.

Interviews were conducted in an open-ended manner, allowing the participant to discuss the topics that they believed to be important allow for the collection of rich and concrete data. There were three general questions regarding what it is like being on campus, whether or not the participant felt safe on campus, and some instances of existing/navigating spaces. Interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to two hours, with as many follow up questions as necessary to clarify language or examples given. Audio from each interview was recorded with a portable recorder, and was erased after the transcription was completed. Transcriptions were then used to identify similar themes and dissimilarities among the interviews.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Note on language use: Pronoun usage for respondents is based solely on the preference of the individual as expressed during the interview process.

Life in the South

When travelling south of the Mason-Dixon one finds a region of the United States that is historically and contemporarily religious and conservative. When thinking about the south, the Civil War probably comes to mind and perhaps the movie Deliverance. To the respondents of this study “home” is what resonates the most in regard to the south. Each respondent was either born and raised in North Carolina or has found their way here over the years and now calls the Tar Heel State home. Respondents have ventured through physical, mental, emotional, and societal challenges in coming to terms with the implications of being a young, queer person in the southern United States.

“I remember the first time I got called queer. I was in the sixth grade and I was looking at a painting in class and said, ‘That is so pretty.’ That’s all I said. And someone said, ‘Ha-ha, you used the word pretty, you’re a queer! And I hated it, you know.’” To be sure, this scenario could have happened anywhere across the country, but this happened in a middle school in rural North Carolina to Alex. Alex experienced external and internalized queerphobia as early as sixth grade. They continued to struggle with internalized queerphobia in their early twenties, and still have periods of struggle currently. However, the term queer has come to mean an identity and

reclamation rather than an insult. Not only the term queer but also the term ‘southern’ as well for. Alex. “It’s kind of like my identity with queer. It’s a reclamation. It’s reclaiming it. I am a southern queer.” Until recently, Alex felt a sense of shame around the idea of being southern. The south’s historically racist and problematic norms make for complicated emotions of one’s positionality on southern identity. However, there are parts of southern culture that have made the southern identity something worth reclaiming and redefining. In Alex’s case, it’s Bojangle’s sweet tea and the nostalgia of having their entire family here growing up together. Though not all respondents feel that desire for reclamation. Taylor and Sophia were not born here but the majority of their lives have been spent in North Carolina. When asked if they identified with being southern, both answered an emphatic “No.” Taylor said, “Only because that’s where my dialect is from,” then laughed, “But as for being [deepens accent] a proud southerner, I am not.” Her unrest with the south lies in the religious atmosphere that was present in the town she grew up in. The lack of religious and racial diversity combined with the fire and brimstone approach to queer issues made embodying her queer identity difficult.

“The south is known for being the Bible Belt and we are smack dab in the middle of it. So it is very very hard to be... It was very hard for me growing up with so many white Christians around who would repeatedly tell me that if I didn’t follow this one dude’s rules that I was going to go straight to hell.” Taylor’s perception of southern life is complicated by her Catholic upbringing and current secular feelings on religion. The in-your-face judgement of tent revivals and door-to-door salvation techniques created feelings of guilt and fear. Taylor’s saving grace was her exceptionally open-minded and loving father who confronted her about potential feelings she might have for one of her friends and assured her that his love for her was entirely unconditional. Unfortunately, her mother did and does not share that same outlook, refusing to

discuss partners appropriately or attempting to understand. Her mother's fear of God has also become a fear of Taylor's sexuality.

Sophia is a self-identified transplant, having moved to North Carolina in 2000. She has similar concerns when thinking about southern living. Religious undertones are often present in a variety of social settings including school and community events. "The religion here is different. There tends to be way more guilt and fear put on people of all ages, starting at a very young age." Occurrences of intolerance and homophobia encountered by Sophia were and are perpetrated by individuals driven by religious conviction. Even though she spent the majority of grade school in North Carolina, there is still a bit of "cultural divide" that she expressed feeling.

House Bill 2

Each interview was conducted after the passing of House Bill 2 and was a common theme throughout each narrative. Respondent's demeanors ranged from deeply upset to extremely angry to disbelief, and occasionally a combination of the three. The bill itself was submitted in response to an anti-discrimination ordinance passed by the City Council of Charlotte, that allowed individuals to use public restrooms based on gender identity rather than biological sex. House Bill 2 overturns local governments ordinances and places this legislation into action. It bars transgender and gender variant individuals from using public restrooms that align with their identity. Furthermore, it perpetuates the notion that gender variant people are not seen as human in the eyes of the government and society at large and are not entitled to the same rights and privileges that cis-gender citizens enjoy. It continues to classify gender variant individuals as "other;" something outside of what is expected and welcome in North Carolina. Additionally, it reinforces that businesses are able to fire individuals based on sexuality or gender presentation.

"I want to understand where they're coming from but I can't. I don't. Just because they, Pat McCrory and all of them, it's just... Fearmongering." To Alex, and a couple other

respondents, HB2 is nothing more than an attempt to further silence those who are already voiceless. It is an act of ignorance and intolerance to force individuals who reside in opposition to the majority to assimilate or live illegally. The notion of a human being illegal is not a foreign concept to those of us who have grown up in the United States. The media and the government have continuously described ways in which human lives are illegal or alien. What does it mean to say that a person is illegal? That their existence is illegal? It implies that they are not human, they are not seen or thought of as fully human entities; they are less than. That is exactly what House Bill 2 indicates - that some of North Carolina's residents are not human, not worthy of rights or privileges so easily utilized by other constituents. Queer individuals are not protected in North Carolina; we are being openly and systematically discriminated against.

The University of North Carolina System is being held to the standards set by this new legislation, which has incited numerous acts of dissent from across the state. Universities have sent out emails ensuring that campuses will remain ever accepting and encouraging of diversity, while legally being required to adopt legislation with oppositional rhetoric. The backlash of this bill has pushed transgender and gender variant individuals into the limelight in the most disrespectful of ways; showcasing them as crossdressers and dangerous to the general public. Message boards and comment sections for local news stations are filled with misinterpretations and misunderstandings of who transgender people are. There are threats of violence against any individuals seen in the 'wrong' restroom. Taylor discussed several homophobic/queerphobic and racist incidents at the university she attends during her interview. There is a common area on campus, where students gather before and after classes to spend time outside. During the night the common area was defaced with slurs regarding 'fags' and 'n*****s' that were unwelcome on their campus. She expressed becoming extremely wary being on and around her campus knowing

that students there felt so negatively about minority groups. She no longer hung out there on a regular basis and now only goes to campus for classes then returns home.

Being/Coming Out

The emphasis placed on ‘coming out’ was an integral part of this study as well, though not because the respondents were asked about it. They each provided a coming out story either in response to a question prompt or using the story to tell a larger narrative. The desire to ‘come out’ to experience queer life fully is not lost on these respondents. Each has experienced their own means of coming out and implications of that identity disclosure. Conversely, there were instances mentioned by the respondents in which they withheld identity disclosure to maintain family bonds.

As previously mentioned, Taylor’s coming out experience involved an understanding father and less than understanding mother. After telling her father that she did not have a preference of who she dates, she enjoys all types of people, he became an ordained minister online in the event that she married someone of the same-sex. Oppositely, her mother expressed mourning over the plans she had hoped for her daughter to fulfill that were dashed by queerness. Taylor’s father continues to be supportive of her and they frequently discuss the on-goings of queer life and politics. She and her partner visit and stay in his home often which they considered to be a very safe and affirming space. Her mother and stepfather continue to not acknowledge Taylor’s relationship or her sexuality in any capacity. To keep the peace, she no longer attempts to talk about it or discuss matters related to it with her mother and does not associate with her stepfather.

Lesley Marple touches on the phenomenon of not or partially disclosing identities to better maintain community or employment ties in “Rural Queers? The loss of the Rural in Queer” (2005). While being an out and open person in regards to gender and sexuality, Taylor is

concerned (especially with the passing of HB2) about the prospects of finding employment in North Carolina. She recently resigned from a company that had their own anti-discrimination policies that protected employees in regards to gender presentation and sexual orientation regardless of state law. While looking for new employment, Taylor's main concern is whether or not the places she interviews will have the same types of anti-discrimination measures in place or if she will have to practice non-disclosure of her identity to protect future employment. This is a real and complex concern, especially when thinking about who society sees as human (Butler 2004).

Butler's notion of human visibility is reflected in the ways that Taylor is reluctant to embody her identity in the midst of prospective new employers. To speak up and to be visible as a queer body is to denounce the assumed heterosexual, cis-gender status. Though those characteristics are ascribed to her body without her consent, if she does not disclose her sexuality she can maintain the status of human as denoted by societal norms. As Butler points out, the norms of society are what creates the body, the identity. The body is not exclusively defined by the individual, it also defined by society (2004). What happens to individuals who cannot choose (for whatever reason) to not disclose their identity? For those who present and act outside of the normalized dichotomies are those who are continuously seen as non-human.

Similarly, Sophia is concerned with the disclosure of identity in her workspace as well for one of the two of her jobs. On and off for the last several years she has been a dancer at a couple of different nightclubs in North Carolina. A large portion of people that she has and does dance with identify within the queer spectrum. It is an unwritten rule that dancers do not disclose their queer identity to their guests (most cis-males) because they are attempting to sell a particular type of fantasy. Disrupting the fantasy with small facts like some dancers are not sexually attracted to males or are also attracted to various genders could lead to less money being made in

a night or even violence (verbal, emotional, or physical) by the guest. “And it’s weird that we put ourselves in those situations. But I think that we become so desensitized to our situations where we become so used to closing off who we are when we’re there that it’s just another drop in the bucket, honestly.” The space inside the club must create a certain type of sexuality that the guests wish to participate in or fantasize about. This makes the choice of discussing one’s sexual identity unappealing, especially when the financial status of the dancers is dependent on tips provided by guests.

Sophia’s second job allows her the freedom to fully embody her sexual identity as the company she works for values and seeks out diverse employees. Disclosing her identity in this setting was and continues to be fulfilling and comfortable. The employers, several of which also are queer identifying, create a safe and affirming space for their employees to work and connect with one another in meaningful ways. Representation in this work environment is important to the visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals and helps people feel more like they will be accepted and welcomed into these spaces. Marple and Gray both touch on the importance of queer visibility to young rural queers and the same principle applies to numerous institutions, not just rural areas. Seeing, conversing, and knowing individuals who share the same experiences and struggles that you have allows for a community based on understanding which is what Sophia has found in her second job. She has found a space that allows her to live fully in her identity but also celebrates her as a human being.

Alex went through grade school without disclosing their sexuality or gender identity to anyone other than internet friends, where they often found comfort and support. When they started at the university they’re currently attending, they slowly started to make connections in the LGBTQ+ community and began to have dialogue about varying identities. It was in those conversations that Alex was able to try on and explore identities that weren’t previously

conceivable. In the flux between and betwixt fixed categories is where they found the most comfortable space to inhabit. Due to unstable, uncategorized identification Alex is not seen as human. This fact is not overlooked by their family who have struggled to come to terms with the ways that Alex identifies. Since they were born and raised in North Carolina, the majority of their family still lives in and nearby. They disclosed their identity to their mother about two years ago, and she is supportive in her own way. Alex has decided not to discuss identity matters with their father at all. They expressed that they felt like their father was far too religious and conservative to be open enough to accept a child who identifies the ways that Alex does. Though Alex is self-proclaimed unapologetic about their gender presentation and sexuality, their family refuses to acknowledge their chosen name and pronouns. There is a certain violence found at dismissals of individual's name and pronoun usage, keeping that gray areas between the dichotomies as murky and stigmatized as ever. As Alex's family refuses to accept or acknowledge the ways Alex needs to live their life, they cease to view Alex as a human being.

Creating Safe Spaces

The creation of safe spaces to fully experience and embody one's identity is not found in concrete places. It is not in one building on one campus at one time. It transcends fixed spatial ties and lies within the moments where like minded individuals come together to form their own spaces of understanding and safety. For the respondents of this study those spaces consisted of a cafeteria where a partner worked, queer campus organization's events and meetings, apartments, and protest spaces. It is not a geographic location, but a culmination of acceptance, kindred spirits, and mutual respect. To each individual 'safety' holds different definitions, but the conclusion remains the same: Temporary settings in which queer bodies may be fully realized and recognized as human.

As mentioned in the previous section, the space where Sophia finds the most comfort and safety is at an amusement park where she has worked for a number of years now. The park itself is run by open and affirming individuals who welcome diversity and promote inclusion. It is in the context of employment within the park, with those people, during a particular time that allows for an embodiment of identity and a carefree way to express oneself accordingly. Secondly, Sophia's most safe spaces are her own home and the home of her parents. From an early age, her parents would often tell Sophia and her sisters that they would support anything the girls needed or wanted to do. It holds true to this day. The home and values that her family has built over the years has transformed into a sanctuary of sorts. This lends itself to the notion that safe spaces are not necessarily locations at all, but are the spaces that are filled with the most support and love offered.

Taylor's safe spaces consisted of the apartment where she and her significant other live with their dogs, and the cafeteria where her significant other works. The couple has transformed their apartment into a safe haven not only for themselves, but also for other queer individuals on campus. A SafeZone triangle is proudly displayed in their window, welcoming anyone who is in need of silence, or a hug, or conversation. It is important for the couple to provide a loving space for others in their small community, as it is so small and often overlooked by the university at large. The second space is within the university's cafeteria where her partner works daily. Taylor says that the friends she and her partner have made with her co-workers have created a space where they may fully be themselves, even though it is a public space. The forged connections between people have formed a temporary safe space for the couple. Once they leave, that space ceases to exist in protective capacity. That is not to say that others don't experience similar feelings of security within those walls, only that the exact setting is only capable with the exact actors (to borrow a term from Goffman).

In the days following the passing of House Bill 2, Alex found their safety and recognition in the forefront of the battle. They were extremely active in protests around the state, participating in acts of civil disobedience and finding pockets of queer spaces along the way. On a busy intersection in Chapel Hill, the day after the passing of HB2, a large group of protesters filled the sidewalks and street. The local police were there monitoring their movements, waiting for the moment one of them stepped out of line. However, something else entirely occurred. The leaders of the protest kept the crowd together, policing themselves. With the chants of, “Back up, back up, we need our freedom, freedom. Tell these racist cops we don’t need ‘em, need ‘em.” And it worked; there were no arrests that day. The protesters, Alex included, created a safe space for its members on one of the busiest intersections in Chapel Hill to embody their identities and demonstrate for the rights only afforded to those identifying within the normalized dichotomies and with dominate power structures. Once the demonstration dispersed, the space ceased to exist and it returned to the intersection it always has been.

“I’ve grown a lot within the last two weeks [post HB2]. Being around people that love me. That I just met. We’re family now.” In the face of government sanctioned discrimination, pockets of safety have been created to better cope with emotions and implications of new legislation. Alex has fashioned ties with other queer people that they would have never met had it not been for demonstrating against HB2. It has been a journey of self-discovery and an eye-opening experience as to what local and state governments are capable of. While attempting to police queer individual’s bodies and identities the state has created an undesired side-effect – the unifying of the oppressed minority. Echoes of Paulo Freire reverberate as bands of minorities come together in recognition of the injustices further pressed against them and create spaces of intelligent and strategic resistance (1972). It is in that resistance that a peace is found, that a brief moment of queer space is recognized.

Campus Life

Campuses are intended to be safe places for students to learn, socialize, explore, and reside. They are hubs of activities and diverse interests where students may find new ways of thinking and being in the world. Historically, campuses have played pivotal parts in societally changing movements such as the Equal Rights Movement, various anti-war campaigns, feminist and LGBTQ+ rights. For some, campuses have become safe havens where progressive ideals are flowing. For others, campuses are just another place to be constantly wary. In terms of LGBTQ+ students with access to full-time resource centers in the University of North Carolina System, only six of the seventeen universities have such accommodations⁵. This puts students who do not attend these universities at a disadvantage, especially those who are in need of critical resources.

Taylor's university does not have an LGBT center or SafeZone⁶ office, like some of its UNC counterparts. Queer students fall under a multicultural or intercultural umbrella that is handled by one office, and LGBTQ+ events are not often held. Alex's university also does not have either a center or a SafeZone office. However, there is an active queer organization on campus that provides resources and holds regular meetings open to the university. Over the last several years the organization has gone through many structural changes to become more inclusive to new and emerging identities.

One of Alex's concerns when on campus is bathroom usage. They have problems navigating public spaces without open staring or side comments by passersby. Hyper-attention is now paid to public restrooms and who is in those spaces. "I will say that I do not use the men's

⁵ Schools that have fulltime LGBTQ+ centers or resource offices: North Carolina Central, University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, Appalachian State University, North Carolina State, University of North Carolina – Wilmington, and East Carolina Universities.

⁶ SafeZone is a program designed to educate individuals or groups about the various gender and sexual identities as well as provides avenues of ally-ship. Upon completion of the course, triangle shaped stickers are given out so they may be displayed in offices, classrooms, etc. to show that you are offering a safe space to LGBTQ+ people

restroom when I wear lipstick... When I have worn lipstick, I literally think that I strained myself trying to pee so fast trying to get in and out of there.” People have become wary of who’s using the restroom with them and what their biological anatomy consists of. “When I’m femme presenting I make sure to drink a lot of water in the morning and pee right before I leave so I don’t have to go in public.” Those who are using restrooms that seems contradictory to their gender presentation are subject to ridicule and in some cases, violence. Alex reinforces the fact that they have never faced physical violence on the campus they navigate but have been subjected to various forms of micro-aggressions.

“There was a professor that I had a couple of semesters ago that said they would only go by the names on their role sheet. I dropped that class so fast.” As previously mentioned, there is a violence attached to knowingly mis-gendering a person. The fact that a professor at a public university refused to use preferred gender pronouns and names is disheartening to individuals who, at the beginning of every semester, send out emails prior to the first class meeting to inform the professor of corrections to BlackBoard or the university email system. Despite this incident, Alex found a niche in their university who helped them discover things about their self. The department of their major is extremely supportive and willing to use correct pronouns and name. This includes professors and students alike. The classroom atmosphere is set up to welcoming to all individuals; recognizing and celebrating their differences but also using shared experiences to learn from one another. Alex has found this type of learning to be exceptionally fruitful and provided a space for positive co-learning.

Sophia’s interactions and experiences on campus are consistently positive with a few exceptions. She is a non-traditional student who does not live on campus, but she spends a good deal of time there in class and studying. There is an LGBTQ+ organization that is active, hosting regular meetings and various events. The university itself often has events directed towards the

queer community and to raise awareness about queer issues among the student population.

Though the campus as a whole is making strides towards inclusion, Sophia has had one-on-one encounters with students involving queerphobic language and, once, a physical shove. She expressed attempting to write off the incident as ignorance on the perpetrator's part, however, she replayed the shove several times over after hearing about the shooting in Pulse, the Orlando nightclub. "I was reminded of how much that bothered me. I mean, he didn't have a gun but he was physical with me. I'm a complete stranger. I'm smaller than him. I can't defend myself as well. What if he had been more violent?" Thoughts like these are common occurrences for her when in public spaces with the political and social climate so on edge about gender and sexual orientation in North Carolina.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This study looked at the ways young queer individuals navigated the spaces they inhabit and the aspects of those spaces/places that provide a sense of safety. There are several facets of the respondent's narratives that align with the current literature and lend a new voice to the academic community. Beyond that, respondent's narratives provided several new directions that research may go to further illuminate ways queer people live in the world, not only in the southern United States but nationally.

The similarity that is most striking among the narratives is how each respondent when asked, "Tell me about what it is like to live here" included a coming out piece without any prompting. The desire or need to 'come out' is so ingrained in our culture when talking and thinking about queer people – especially within queer communities themselves. It seems as though one must disclose their identity to gain access into queer or LGBTQ+ communities, or have the strong desire to do so in the future. There is an amount of pressure placed on the individual to live openly and freely with the first step involving sliding out of the closet. As Butler has expressed, the notion of coming out of the closet implies that one must be enclosed in the closet previously (2005). But stepping out, and publicly stating an identity only puts the individual into another type of closet with the stigma and norms attached to being a queer person in our culture.

The only respondent who did not place a great deal of emphasis on coming out was Sophia. While growing up her parents created a space where they would assure their children that

they were loved and were always going to be loved no matter what. They expressed frequently that they had no issues with people of different walks of life and that happiness is all they wanted for their children. When Sophia came out at fourteen, it was no big deal. The pressure for the fourteen-year-old to come out was still there but the ease of reception by her parents instilled a sense of comfort within her. She does not feel like being queer is very important to her, it's just another piece of who she is. There is so much fear and necessity linked to the coming out process, especially in regards to immediate family, that the emphasis placed on the individual can sometimes seem overwhelming. If that pressure was not there, the anxieties associated with coming out in the community would be significantly lessened.

In the same token, the idea of selective disclosure of identity appeared in all respondent's narratives. There were some people who respondents knew would be open to their identities, while the knowledge of others beliefs dissuaded them from attempting. In Alex's case it was their father, in Taylor's it was prospective employers, and in Sophia's it was customers at work. For each respondent, non-disclosure was an attempt to maintain a particular type of atmosphere or amicability. Thinking about the question: What makes someone human? The non-disclosure allowed the targeted audience of each respondent to continue seeing the individual as human, as a person worthy of attention and connection. Were that disclosure to slip off, the benefits of humanity might also dissipate.

The passage of House Bill 2 was also a commonality amongst respondents. Each seemed to experience something similar to a stripping of rights, and/or identity. Collectively, they felt like it was a violent attack on the queer community that was unwarranted, unprompted, and hugely unneeded. There was a worry for their own well-being, but each expressed a fierce worry for their loved ones. Both Taylor and Sophia's partners are androgynous presenting and the backlash they have faced since HB2 has been a constant thought on everyone's mind. Alex has been moved to

action, participating in numerous protests across the state. In response to onlooker's objections to the protests interrupting their evening, "Yeah, we're ruining your night and we're ruining your family's night and your child's night. And I understand that but this is ruining our lives. I'm not saying that you're a bad person or that I don't care about your life but my life is more important than your night." This is a particularly profound reflection of two conflicting political sides of HB2. The onlooker is concerned that the blocked traffic is going to interfere with their night out in an affluent area of Chapel Hill while Alex is concerned for their rights as a citizen of North Carolina being interfered with.

The creation of temporary pockets of safe/queer spaces is the most important finding of this study. Each respondent was able to pinpoint a place that they feel incredibly safe and able to be themselves. There is a spatial transition between place to space when place is imbued with social or cultural meaning. In this case, the meaning resides in the respondent's ability to fully embody their identities in a safe environment. Once those particular individuals exit those particular spaces, the space converts back to the public place it was prior to the original transformation. These pockets of spatial transitions are paramount in the ways queer individuals navigate life. At the beginning of this paper it was mentioned that it's difficult to traverse historically religious and conservative spaces as a queer individual. It is these temporary spatial pockets that allow for a mental and emotional break from dominate society. It is in these spaces that oppression is relieved, if only for a conscious moment to provide space for connection, understanding, commonality, healing, and acceptance. Setha Low unpacks the differences between space and place as discussed in the literature review, but I would like to take this concept a step further; I believe that it is in these spaces where one may be able to think beyond what is currently possible in society in terms of identity. These spaces can provide an atmosphere where an individual is the most comfortable and at peace in their identities and bodies. When feeling

validated as a real and viable human being in an oppressed identity, one might be able to see beyond their societal positionality and conceive new ways of being in the world that are not currently viable options. It is feelings of safety for individuals who are threatened that might provide the opportunity meaningful and constructive change.

As I have worked through this project I have been consistently reminded of a quote from my favorite fictional character, Atticus Finch, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... Until you climb into his skin and walk around in it” (Lee 1960). Atticus was not just concerned with knowing how a person feels or sees things, but also how that person interacts with the world and how the world interacts with them. To climb into someone’s skin and walk around would be to feel the way that their identity is received by others – race, gender, presentation. It would mean feeling the privileges or injustices that come along with being that person. In talking with my respondents, they gave me the closest feeling to being able to do as Atticus suggests. That has provided a wealth of admiration and respect along with a glimpse of what it is like to be them in the spaces that they navigate and inhabit.

Based on respondent’s narratives and in-depth literature review, I cannot emphasize the importance of the creation of temporary spatial pockets for queer individuals. I would suggest that further projects and research take time to examine the many and varying ways that places are briefly converted for uses of individuals to embody their identities. It is in this research that we might better understand the countless perspectives of queer individual’s interactions with public places and spaces in combination with societal norms. This understanding is of utmost importance to not only queer individuals or minorities groups but to individuals who, perhaps, do not yet have conceptual vision of ways they might otherwise navigate their own identities. It is my belief that these temporary spatial pockets are one avenue of conceptualizing beyond what we are currently capable of as a society and as queer people.

I would advocate for exploratory research into identity development of queer individuals engaging in different levels of sex work. This could use the aforementioned place/space distinction in combination with the suppression or disclosure of one or more parts of an individual's identity where sex work is practiced. This could culminate with several other sociological theories to provide really interesting and meaningful narratives about sex work done by people who do not adhere to normalized gender and sexuality dichotomies. With this the researchers would be considering multilayered marginalization and stigmatization that would be thought provoking combined with presentation of self.

The respondents of this study shared very similar concerns about North Carolina's current political climate and expressed concerns over their future well-being. North Carolina might be where these people call home, where they are going to school and working, but they no longer feel like they are safe here nor does their local government have their best interests at heart. The institutionalized and legalized intolerance and, frankly, ignorance embedded in legislation is detrimental to queer citizens living in North Carolina. Though protests, marches, sit-ins, boycotts, and lock-ins have been implemented, the state refuses to see queer bodies as viable citizens of the state and is attempting to force University of North Carolina campuses to enforce this legislation. It is unsurprising that respondents felt angry and disheartened.

This study is intended to examine and present the ways that queer individuals view their personal safety in the spaces they navigate, but it has provided inconceivable amounts more than that. Respondents shared their fears, doubts, insecurities, weaknesses, successes, happiness, and lives with me. I have attempted to do each justice in this paper and hope to continue to do so in future research.

“Atticus, he was real nice”

“Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them.”

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