

“This is the future that conservatives want” Chronotopes of Trans Life in North Carolina’s Sociopolitical Climate

Archie Crowley (they/them)
Assistant Professor, English, Elon University

Haley Kinsler (he/they/she)
MA Student, Linguistics, North Carolina State University

Land Acknowledgement

This work was conducted on the traditional homelands and gathering places of the Eno, Tutelo, Shakori, Coharie, Eastern Band of Cherokee, Haliwa-Saponi, Lumbee, Meherrin, Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation, Sappony and Waccamaw Siouan in the Piedmont of what is now called North Carolina.

We share an ongoing responsibility to safeguard these lands and to respect the sovereignty of the tribes and Indigenous nations residing in North Carolina.

Additionally, we work on land where local infrastructure was built by the labor of enslaved Black people who were forcibly brought here against their will.

Trans life in the U.S. Southeast

- ▶ “I love the South, but loving the South is mighty tricky” (Whitlock, 2007 p. xxii)
- ▶ Widespread narrative that queer and trans Southerners want to “escape” the South
- ▶ The South as a region is often construed as “an easy repository for all that is backward and hurtful in the United States, past and present” (Law 2001, p 3)
- ▶ Increased research on trans people who do choose to stay in the South (Abelson 2019, Rogers 2020)
- ▶ Estimated 44,750 in North Carolina (0.60% of pop.) (Flores et al. 2016)



Photo Credit: Hannah Schoenbaum/AP Photo
Aug. 16, 2023

Anti-trans legislation across the U.S.

- ▶ Anti-trans bills passed in 2022
 - ▶ 26 bills across 13 states
 - ▶ Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah
- ▶ Anti-trans bills passed in 2023
 - ▶ 85 bills across 24 states
 - ▶ Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi, Montana, **North Carolina**, North Dakota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Wisconsin, West Virginia, Wyoming
- ▶ Anti-trans bills passed in 2024 (so far)
 - ▶ 18 bills across 8 states
 - ▶ Alabama, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Ohio, Utah, Wyoming

North Carolina



Photo Credit: Nat Johnson, April 25, 2016



Photo Credit: Jennifer Fernandez/NC Health News, May 26, 2023

2016

HB 2 "Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act"

2017

HB 142 "Preemption of Regulation of Access to Multiple Occupancy Restrooms"

2018

2019

HB 906 "Statewide Nondiscrimination/Funds"

2020

2021

HB 358 "Save Women's Sports Act"

2022

2023

HB 574 "Fairness in Women's Sports Act"
HB 808 "Gender Transition/Minors"
SB 49: "Parents' Bill of Rights"

2024

7 anti-trans bills currently in the legislature

The North Carolina Trans and Nonbinary Language Project

- ▶ Our Positionalities
- ▶ Recruitment
 - Snowball sampling via social networks (FB groups, Discord Servers) and in-person flyers
- ▶ Interviews
 - August-December 2023
 - 18 one-on-one semi-structured interviews with trans and nonbinary people living in NC
 - Conducted in locations chosen by participants (e.g., university offices, homes, public library, Zoom)



Participants



► Pre-interview demographic survey

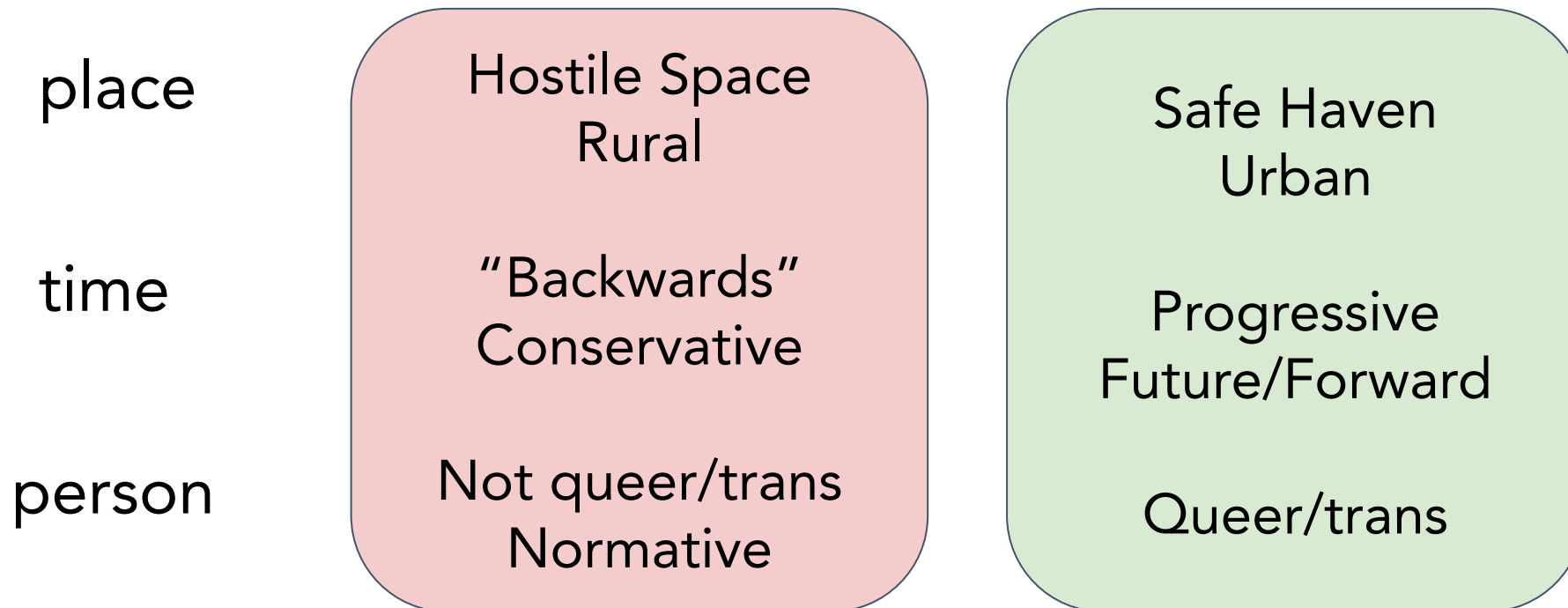
Gender	3 trans women, 2 trans men, 11 non-binary, and 2 "other"
Age	Range from 22-45, with a median age of 25
Race	13 white, 3 Black, 1 Indigenous, and 1 mixed-race
Education	5 have attended some college, 2 have an Associates, 8 have a Bachelors, and 3 have a Masters
Class	5 identified as working class, 4 as lower middle class, 4 as middle class, and 5 as upper middle class
Time in NC	9 have lived in NC their whole life, 3 for more than half, 3 for more than a third, and 2 for less than a third

Chronotopes

- ▶ The chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981) highlights the ways that “space, time, and models of personhood are linked in narrative frameworks” (Rosa, 2015, p.109).
- ▶ Chronotopes allow for a multidimensional account of time and space to contextualize identity in interaction (Blommaert, 2015)
- ▶ “The invocation of specific chronotopic frames foreground specific types of language/identity work, and thus social behaviors, that both move across and bring together multiple spatialities and temporalities” (Rowlett and King 2023)

Chronotopes

- How do trans and nonbinary North Carolinians' experiences of *timespace* shape their relationship to the region?



Safe Haven vs. Hostile Space

- ▶ Participants describe different types of timespaces in North Carolina based on their lived experiences as trans people in the state
- ▶ These chronotopes offer a mechanism for understanding how “participants rely on chronotopic formulations of place, time, and personhood” (Agha 2015) in a way that shapes their practices and behaviors
- ▶ The *safe haven* describes a space that fosters trans inclusivity and allows the possibility for a trans future in the South
- ▶ This is in contrast to the *hostile space*, which invokes popular narratives about the South as being sociopolitically conservative and regressive



Hannah (she/her)

white, trans woman, 36 years old

- 1 Durham to North Carolina experiences are very different
- 2 in Durham it's kind of like easy to forget that I have this difference
with other people
- 3 a lot of the time it's easy to just like blend in kind of
- 4 and it's like I notice people who I don't know maybe they are or
aren't trans
- 5 but they- it seems like they're queer presenting in some way just very
often
- 6 and then you know you leave Durham and you're on a road trip or
something and you're like
- 7 'oh, yeah okay this is what most of the state looks like actually'

Hannah (she/her) white, trans woman, 36 years old

- 1 Durham to North Carolina experiences are very different
- 2 in Durham it's kind of like easy to forget that I have this difference
with other people
- 3 a lot of the time it's easy to just like blend in kind of
- 4 and it's like I notice people who I don't know maybe they are or
aren't trans
- 5 but they- it seems like they're queer presenting in some way just very
often
- 6 and then you know you leave Durham and you're on a road trip or
something and you're like
- 7 'oh, yeah okay this is what most of the state looks like actually'

Hannah (she/her)

white, trans woman, 36 years old

- 1 Durham to North Carolina experiences are very different
- 2 in Durham it's kind of like easy to forget that I have this difference
with other people
- 3 a lot of the time it's easy to just like blend in kind of
- 4 and it's like I notice people who I don't know maybe they are or
aren't trans
- 5 but they- it seems like they're queer presenting in some way just very
often
- 6 and then you know you leave Durham and you're on a road trip or
something and you're like
- 7 'oh, yeah okay this is what most of the state looks like actually'

Hannah (she/her)

white, trans woman, 36 years old

- 1 Durham to North Carolina experiences are very different
- 2 in Durham it's kind of like easy to forget that I have this difference
with other people
- 3 a lot of the time it's easy to just like blend in kind of
- 4 and it's like I notice people who I don't know maybe they are or
aren't trans
- 5 but they- it seems like they're queer presenting in some way just very
often
- 6 and then you know you leave Durham and you're on a road trip or
something and you're like
- 7 'oh, yeah okay this is what most of the state looks like actually'



Stone (she/her or they/them) Afro-Caribbean, gender non-conforming femme, 21 years old

- 1 I personally have never felt uncomfortable in North Carolina even when I was very clearly transitioning
- 2 and even when I quite frankly look like a gay twink with like dyed hair
- 3 now I feel that widely the political atmosphere is tense and tightening
- 4 in a way that makes me and a lot of my friends and community members feel stifled
- 5 I will say that I have never felt so constantly cautious and aware of my surroundings than I have at this moment in time

Safe Haven vs. Hostile Space

Stone (she/her or they/them)

Afro-Caribbean, gender-nonconforming
femme, 21 years old

- 1 I personally have never felt uncomfortable in North Carolina even
when I was very clearly transitioning
- 2 and even when I quite frankly look like a gay twink with like dyed hair
- 3 now I feel that widely the political atmosphere is tense and
tightening
- 4 in a way that makes me and a lot of my friends and community
members feel stifled
- 5 I will say that I have never felt so constantly cautious and aware of my
surroundings than I have at this moment in time

Safe Haven vs. Hostile Space

Stone (she/her or they/them)

Afro-Caribbean, gender-nonconforming
femme, 21 years old

- 1 I personally have never felt uncomfortable in North Carolina even
when I was very clearly transitioning
- 2 and even when I quite frankly look like a gay twink with like dyed hair
- 3 now I feel that widely the political atmosphere is tense and
tightening
- 4 in a way that makes me and a lot of my friends and community
members feel stifled
- 5 I will say that I have never felt so constantly cautious and aware of my
surroundings than I have at this moment in time

Safe Haven vs. Hostile Space

Stone (she/her or they/them)

Afro-Caribbean, gender-nonconforming
femme, 21 years old

- 1 I personally have never felt uncomfortable in North Carolina even
when I was very clearly transitioning
- 2 and even when I quite frankly look like a gay twink with like dyed hair
- 3 now I feel that widely the political atmosphere is tense and
tightening
- 4 in a way that makes me and a lot of my friends and community
members feel stifled
- 5 I will say that I have never felt so constantly cautious and aware of my
surroundings than I have at this moment in time

“Backwards” Southernness vs. Queer Futurity

- ▶ Participants connect the South to “stereotypical qualities of moral and linguistic backwardness” (Chun 2018, p.425)
 - ▶ Jaden: “[Sounding Southern] seems to shape people's opinions of me in a way that I don't like with being kind of **backwards** with being maybe a bit less intelligent.”
- ▶ Queer life is often oriented to a queer futurity (Muñoz 2009)
- ▶ With the increase of anti-trans legislation in NC and surrounding states, there is awareness of a conservative future
- ▶ However, some participants challenge this chronotopic construction of the South, instead articulating a move towards a trans Southern future



“Backwards” Southernness vs. Queer Futurity

Ezra (they/them)

white, nonbinary, 29 years old

- 1 no one gets you know like any- anything that talks about marriage or relationships or gender or anything
- 2 is now no longer allowed on my bookshelf
- 3 and in you know so they basically talked about like schools teachers in Florida are already doing this
- 4 where it's like cool we can learn about like earthquakes and like the water cycle and that's it
- 5 like it's like this is the future that conservatives want

“Backwards” Southernness vs. Queer Futurity

Ezra (they/them)

white, nonbinary, 29 years old

- 1 no one gets you know like any- anything that talks about marriage or relationships or gender or anything
- 2 is now no longer allowed on my bookshelf
- 3 and in you know so they basically talked about like **schools teachers in Florida are already doing this**
- 4 where it's like cool we can learn about like earthquakes and like the water cycle and that's it
- 5 like it's like **this is the future that conservatives want**



“Backwards” Southernness vs. Queer Futurity

Kay (they/them)

Black, nonbinary, 23 years old

- 1 because I really like long term
- 2 I see myself returning back to the place I was from
- 3 so that I can take what I've learned and hopefully like plant seeds
here for people
- 4 especially like it's much easier to be queer and Black in California
- 5 than it is to be queer and Black in the bible belt like Southern United
States

“Backwards” Southernness vs. Queer Futurity

Kay (they/them)

Black, nonbinary, 23 years old

- 1 because I really like long term
- 2 I see myself returning back to the place I was from
- 3 so that I can take what I've learned and hopefully like plant seeds
here for people
- 4 especially like it's much easier to be queer and Black in California
- 5 than it is to be queer and Black in the bible belt like Southern United
States



“Backwards” Southernness vs. Queer Futurity

Daisy (he/they)
white, agender/genderqueer, 26 years old

- 1 there's a lot of good things about North Carolina
- 2 it's not you know not everyone down here is a Republican
- 3 not everyone down here is like horrible evil etc.
- 4 I'm like, I don't know
- 5 I want like
- 6 being an NC native is a really important part of my identity now
- 7 because I want that community to exist for people
- 8 like I don't know
- 9 I don't think we should have to leave the places we grew up in
- 10 that we're attached to
- 11 just to find a safe community

“Backwards” Southernness vs. Queer Futurity

Daisy (he/they)
white, agender/genderqueer, 26 years old

- 1 there's a lot of good things about North Carolina
- 2 it's not you know not everyone down here is a Republican
- 3 not everyone down here is like horrible evil, etc.
- 4 I'm like, I don't know
- 5 I want like
- 6 being an NC native is a really important part of my identity now
- 7 because I want that community to exist for people
- 8 like I don't know
- 9 I don't think we should have to leave the places we grew up in
- 10 that we're attached to
- 11 just to find a safe community

Conclusion

- ▶ As trans and nonbinary people in North Carolina navigate the onslaught of anti-trans legislation at the state level, they discursively construct contrasting chronotopic frames:
 - ▶ “Safe haven” vs “hostile place”
 - ▶ “Backwards South” vs “queer future”
- ▶ However, the contrasts are messy and malleable
- ▶ For many participants, there is a desire to work for a *trans Southern futures*

References

- Abelson, M. J. (2019). *Men in place: Trans masculinity, race, and sexuality in America*. U of Minnesota Press.
- Agha, A. (2015). Chronotopic formulations and kinship behaviors in social history. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 401-415.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination*.
- Blommaert, J. (2015). Chronotopes, scales, and complexity in the study of language in society. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 44, 105-116.
- Chun, E. W. (2018). Listening to the Southern redneck: Pathways of contextualization on YouTube. *American Speech: A Quarterly of Linguistic Usage*, 93(3-4), 425-444.
- Dews, C. L. B., & Law, C. L. (Eds.). (2001). *Out in the South*. Temple University Press.
- Flores, A. R., Herman, J. L., Gates, G. J., & Brown, T. N. T. (2016). How many adults identify as transgender in the united states? (p. 13). The Williams Institute.
- Rogers, B. A. (2020). *Trans men in the South: Becoming men*. Lexington Books.
- Rosa, J. (2016). Racializing language, regimenting Latinas/os: Chronotope, social tense, and American raciolinguistic futures. *Language & Communication*, 46, 106-117.
- Rowlett, B. J., & King, B. W. (2023). Merging mobilities: Querying knowledges, actions, and chronotopes in discourses of transcultural relationships from a North/South queer contact zone. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 20(2), 111-127
- Whitlock, R. U. (Ed.). (2013). *Queer South Rising: Voices of a contested place*. IAP.

Thank you!

- ▶ Thank you to the participants who generously gave their time and insight!

Archie Crowley
acrowley7@elon.edu

Haley Kinsler
hmkinsle@ncsu.edu



Image Credit: Campaign for Southern Equality