Field work report

Americans in movement

Two case studies:

1) *I had to move elsewhere***: Relationships and life choices of early career queer professionals in the United States;**

2) Bowling without friends? Memory work and personhood among Americans in movement

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1. Introduction

What is this research about?

The fieldwork report consists of two different topics – relationships and life choices of early career queer professionals in the United States and the effect of past friendships on one's personhood among American residents who have spent years in work or family-related movements. The research report serves as a preliminary data discussion for two subsequent and separate articles. The analysis of data and the core arguments are subject to change.

Based on interviews with mostly young American queer graduate students, the first discussion and potential article explore experiences and choices that young professionals make to align their career prospects, economic security, and personal life choices in the contemporary United States with ever-changing conservative policies that affect LGBTQA+ people. Besides work-based mobility that affects the daily life of many young professionals in the United States, I explore how people who do not identify as hetero- or cis-normative make choices about where they live and work and/or imagine living and working in the future based on changing political environments. My preliminary data show that besides jobs, graduate school positions, or scholarships, young queer professionals also evaluate potential political effects on their lives. Such evaluations include moving away from hometowns or home states in search of more open-minded states, towns, and cities, where they "can be themselves" and choosing job or graduate school positions in more democratic states. The choices my interlocutors make not only affect the career chances of young queer professionals but also their mobility "paths" and personal relationships.

In the second discussion for a potential article, I pay attention to how my interlocutors talked about their "best friends" and close friendships as motionless relations frozen in time and yet – still very meaningful. One of the main reasons for not "keeping in touch" with their friends was mobility. All my interviewees have moved a considerable amount in their lives: usually at first for college, then university, different employments, and some of them for their newly built families that included, for example, either moving to their spouse's location or back to their hometown to raise children closer to their parents or extended family. Such mobility throughout their young adult lives had left my interlocutors longing for the close friendships they once had. Thus, through our conversations, I was mostly interested in how research participants spoke of (the meaning and transformations of their) friendships in their lives.

In this discussion, I refer to "bowling alone" not so much as a disintegrating social network (Putnam 2000) as more of a lived reality concerning my interlocutors' personhoods, in which past friendships play a meaningful role. I argue that friendships that my interlocutors talk

about have become not so much about sustaining meaningful social networks (and social capital), as a process related to one's moving in time and as a meaningful core to who they are.

2. Research field and methods

For six months (January – June 2023) I conducted 24 on-site and online interviews with young queer professionals and Americans who have been moving more than once because of education, career, family, or other reasons. One interview originally conducted on February 13th, 2023, was deleted on April 17th, 2023, upon the request of the respective research participant. I do not include data from this interview in the study. Overall, I have reached the number of interviews set during the project.

Out of 24 interviewed people, 12 include data about young queer professionals and scholars (mostly graduate students) and their experiences of movement. Thirteen interviews include data about Americans in movement and the effect of mobility on a person's sense of belonging and specifically formation, understanding, and experiences of friendships and their personhood. Data from two interviews are used in both research topics – *elsewhereness* among young queer professionals and middle-aged Americans in the movement. The reasoning behind such a decision was both the content of those interviews and the age of the research participants. Meaning, both research participants talked in detail about their experiences as queers and their quest for a place where they could be "who they are" and also about the effect of mobility on their personal relationships. At the same time, their age – 39 and 36 respectively and extended experience of movement within the U.S., was another important factor. The topic of how middle-aged Americans are "bowling" without friends has never been specifically about a person's age but more about the experience of mobility, that is, how long and extended this experience has been (has a person moved only once or more than once?), those aged 30+ usually had more frequent relocation experiences and often several reasons for moving, for example, moving to attend college, then university, following a job offer and most recently relocation because of a family (marriage, returning to home town to take care about older parents, relocating closer to spouse's relatives, etc. among many).

Although both topics discussed in this field report that will result in two different articles were "Americans in movement", one person was not an American citizen but had come to the United States on a scholarship. I have used this person's interview as a valuable insight into how this person's chosen or determined place of study and also life for the next four years align with the experiences of the rest of the interviewed young queer professionals.

The selection of research participants followed the principle of "snowball sampling". I started with several acquaintances who later either spread the word about the research or

directly introduced me to potential research participants or provided me with an opportunity to attend spaces and events to meet new informants. Since I had recently moved to the United States, Town X, I encountered most of the research participants on the site either through aforementioned acquaintances or by immersing myself in the local community and slowly growing the number of familiar people across the town and beyond. Over the months, I conducted both formal interviews and informal conversations. Out of 24 interviews, 14 were continuous informal conversations and participant observation at local gatherings, such as parties, wine tastings, or when research participants invited me over to meet their friends, relatives, or acquaintances. In all cases, I informed people I might include certain parts of our conversations in this research (if the conversation topic would be interesting or crucial for the research), and they gave me their informed consent. Thus, although officially I interviewed 24 people, participant observation provided me with richer data than just interviews. Time spent with my research participants also provided me with trust I could not have gained in just one interview (a good example of this is the deleted interview – a case, in which the research participant did not feel safe enough and later withdrew her consent).

Since Town X was a university town, I had the chance to meet many Americans who had moved to Town X because of a job opportunity, education, or knowledge of the said town as a quite liberal and democratic place in the region. Ten out of 24 interviews I conducted via Zoom because my research participants lived in different states. One interviewee used to live in Town X, where he attended graduate school but by the time of the interview had moved away. All research participants were informed about the research project, the purpose of the interviews, the use of data, and their rights to the research participants. I recorded all Zoom interviews and several on-site interviews, however, many interviews I did not record. There were two reasons for not recording the interviews. In rare cases, people did not feel comfortable with the recording. Most of the people who did not mind recording were scholars and therefore familiar with qualitative data collection. Another reason for not recording interviews was the fact that many interviews were informal conversations. That is, people were informed about the research, and they had given full consent but often the format of interviews was less formal. During such informal interviews, I took notes and/or wrote fieldwork notes right after the interview. Spending more time together with some research participants, topics of relocation and mobility emerged also in many other informal conversations, and these conversations have proved to be rich in data.

Further data selection and coding, which is partially still in process, was inductive and qualitative, however the way how I arrived at each research topic – 1) *elsewhereness* among young queers and 2) the question of friendships among Americans in movement – was different.

Initially, when I started looking for interlocutors, the idea was to follow the experiences of young scholars, mostly young anthropologists (doctoral students and early post-doctorates), and how frequent relocation because of the chosen graduate program, fieldwork, research, and precarious job opportunities affect their relationships and life choices. After a few interviews, I noticed that three of them identified themselves as queers, and the relocation stories – past, present, and imagined future – were dealing not only with questions concerning job opportunities and the effect of conducting long research studies but also with such questions like "which state I, as a queer, can live in". These stories revealed limitations in the already precarious academic job market and life choices that differed from the experiences of those who did not identify as queers.[1] Therefore, the first research question revealed itself through the interview process.

The second research question about the effect of frequent mobility on personal relationships (specifically friendships) partially emerged through informal conversations I had with American acquaintances a few years ago. Back in 2017-2019, when I lived in the United States, I noticed that many, especially middle-aged, Americans who had been moving more than a couple of times in their lives, when asked about meaningful relationships in their lives, often mentioned their friends. However, what struck me was that in most of the cases when they talked about meaningful friendships it turned out they had not seen or talked to their "best friends" in a long time – sometimes a few years, sometimes even longer. During the research in 2023, I wanted to explore this question in detail, by concentrating on work and family-related mobilities and their effect on other (not immediate family) relationships that people deem meaningful. The average age for this research group was higher than that of young queer professionals. The reason was that I was looking for people who have moved several times in their lives.

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[1] I use the term "queer" based on how most of my interlocutors acknowledged themselves. Some of them identified as gay or lesbians but also used the word "queer", others, mostly whose pronouns were they/them used the term "queer".

3. Preliminary results and potential discussion

3.1. *I had to move elsewhere*: Relationships and life choices of early career queer professionals in the United States

"Oh, I always knew I wanted to live elsewhere. It was too narrow for me, almost suffocating. I mean, Jeez, we'd go to the church every Sunday, 'coz my parents, they're Christians, all right... Especially my mother. So, I had to make it happen, you know? I chose my college on the other side of the state", Chris (29), who is gay, told me in one of our first encounters. For now, Chris has stayed in his home state, which for many years has been considered as a "swing state" or "purple state" – states that could be won by either the Democratic or Republican candidate in statewide or presidential elections. Lately, however, his home state has taken a "red path", experiencing a rise in passed conservative bills and potential "red trend". However, Chris, like several other queer interlocutors has moved to a town that is considered a "blue hub" within a growingly red state. Although, the state politics affect the Town X the same way as the rest of the state, for many people who are born and raised in this state, it has become an LGBTQA+ "sanctuary" – especially, like in Chris's case, compared to their smaller hometowns or rural communities.

Interviews with other young queer students, scholars, or professionals revealed a similar search for "someplace else" when considering what graduate programs apply, what jobs to take, and, overall, where to move to build their lives. In most of the cases, my interlocutors had been born and/or raised in strongly "red states", as they call majority Republican states, or within "conservative" communities, by which they usually mean communities that are prejudiced against queer people and politically support Republican candidates. Some of them had attended colleges or universities in red states before moving away. In most cases, reasons for initially staying in their conservative home states or towns were lower in-state tuitions pointing to another issue of inequality – who can afford to leave their home states for studies. However, all of them had eventually left their communities or states not only to seek better and/or more compatible education or jobs but also actively looking for safer and more inclusive places – a practice that has been recently documented also in media (Horowitch 2023; Nast 2023; Wall 2022).

The additional planning and/or imagining about where to move and build their lives was what drew my attention to young queer professionals compared to young cis-gender and hetero-normative professionals who also experience, for example, job precarity. By additional planning or imagining I mean that queer interlocutors were actively thinking not only which graduate programs they want to apply to, that is, which programs are academically the best fit

and most prospective, which jobs to take but also which programs and jobs not to take due to their geopolitical location. For example, Connor, 24 years old graduate student, who was born and raised in a historically Republican state that for years has been hostile and even dangerous to queer people not only can never imagine going back to his home state but is also always pondering his future professional and academic options. Connor has a list of states where he would never take a job, although some universities in these "red" states might be liberal and "blue" hubs. For him, the list of places not to move to, which he acknowledges is dangerously ever-changing, serves not only as a stepping stone to his imagined life but also as a very harsh reminder of limited academic job positions and career opportunities. When I asked, if Connor would ever consider living in a different country, he replied that his options are limited because of a specific research area that is more of an interest to the American academic world. Therefore, Connor is very aware of how weighing the pros and cons of a livable, that is, queer-friendly state or city affects his future academic employment in times when the academic job market is already precarious for every young scholar. When looking for queer-friendly places, the main question for my interlocutors rarely is, for instance, a possibility for same-sex marriage but rather overall, less tangible inclusiveness and openness, and very tangible safety. The majority of queer people I interviewed have experienced verbal and physical abuse during their lives, including abuse in colleges and universities they have attended before, in their home states. Therefore, in addition to any young American's quest for "where to study, work, and live", my interlocutors repeatedly expressed alertness – they acknowledged that no place is completely protected from anti-LGBTQA+ ideologies that affect their lives. For example, the recently passed Florida Senate Bill 266 (in effect since July 1, 2023) that limits race and gender studies in state universities in Florida directly attacks the last, potentially more liberal spaces – universities – in an overall red state (*House Bill 999 (2023) - The Florida Senate* 2023; *Senate Bill 266 (2023) - The Florida Senate* 2023; Kumar 2023).[2] As 25-year-old Morgan explained to me, although the fact that such a bill has been passed in Florida is not surprising, it represents for other, historically less red states with growing Republican presence that such bills to directly affect educational spaces are possible. For Morgan, as for many other queer people, such changes always "keep [them] alert".

During my fieldwork, I also interviewed four young non-binary professionals (pronouns "they/them") and encountered several other young non-binary people who, similarly like Chris, had moved to Town X from smaller towns because of its supposed inclusiveness or with a specific purpose to attend the university there. When asked how they imagined their future, all

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[2] The Senate Bill 266 follows the 2022 Parental Rights in Education Act HB 1557 (*House Bill 1557 (2022) - The Florida Senate* 2022), commonly referred to as the "Don't Say Gay" law regulating public schools in Florida.

of them expressed worry that the state is becoming more Republican, and they felt it could affect their decision to stay there longer. Similar worry about the state politics' effect on the town's queer population was also expressed by several heteronormative people who are not only friends with queer people I interviewed but also have chosen to live in Town X because of its openness. However, according to some research participants "openness" was restricted due to the comparatively small size of the town. The size and growing "red path" of the state were among the reasons why transgender Shia, who comes from the same state where Town X is, was hoping eventually to move to a bigger city that would provide not only better job opportunities but also bigger queer and, especially, trans community. As 28-year-old Shia put it: "I love this town, but I am moving to City P in a year and a half or so. I just feel I need broader space; you know. Besides, Town X is so close to my hometown and that just stirs up some bad shit. I mean, I'd miss my brothers but, yeah, I want to move further away, I guess, and City P is large enough and liberal… My best friend lives there too. I *kinda* always knew that Town X is just the first step, and I'd go elsewhere after I finish school." In Shia's case, although they acknowledge Town X's inclusiveness and openness mostly because of the big queer community that mostly regenerates itself through the local university, a bigger liberal city promises not only better job options but also an escape from the past that still drags along in Town X.

In all conducted interviews research participants talked about either planned or imagined "someplace else", "elsewhere" or "another place". That was particularly pronounced when they were remembering and talking about their hometowns or other places that had brought discomfort, threats, and limited possibilities to be who they are as young queer adults. Elsewhereness, which describes aforementioned experiences, thus is neither a non-place (Augé 1995) nor a simple quest for political difference or search for "otherness" that juxtaposes "us" and "them" and "here" and "there". Although as an imagined place that derives from alertness and builds upon antonym to a place that is known as unsafe, uncomfortable, and, generally, not livable for queers, through conversations elsewhereness becomes a space on its own that is open for creating content. In this sense, elsewhereness does and exist, by which I mean, that elsewhereness is both imagined but also lived, practiced, and experienced, therefore it covers ontological experiences in the world, including "condition of absence or excess, a being other or more than, a moving, a staying even – though not at home" (Roy et al. 2023, 2). For my research participants "elsewhere" is as much a process from "here" to "between" and "there" and a state of "not-here/not-yet-there" (Muñoz 2009), that partially stems from enforced temporariness (enduring time in place X only to move elsewhere) (Merla and Smit 2020), as it

is a place that comes into being through hope for togetherness, social proximity, a sense of belonging, very tangible safety, and "being oneself".

In anthropological queer literature, elsewhereness as an analytical category has appeared relatively recently as part of a conversation of formations of "queerness across the Global South that are both alienated from and yet familiar to the Western academy" (Roy et al. 2023, 3). Elsewhereness is also used as part of the methodological conversation. Roy and colleagues (Roy et al. 2023) speak back to certain histories and cultures of queer elsewhereness within queer scholarship, that is, by concentrating on experiences in Global South they intend to address assumed marginality (queerness) within marginality (Global South instead of Europe and United States). I am interested in how elsewhereness plays out in supposed (anthropological) centrality – in the United States, a country that still sets the tone in academia and is also still considered as a place to move to rather than move away from. However, my interlocutors inform us that they are trying to move away even if they still stay inside the country. Thus, the "not-here/not-yet-there" also becomes an escape route in a country that is full of pockets of inequality and marginality. With my data I hope to contribute to the discussion of elsewhereness within the realm of queer and mobility studies, starting with questions that deal with "how spaces, citizenship and senses of belonging are continuously challenged and reworked by, from and for the gender and sexual peripheries" (Blidon and Brunn 2022, 320) within pockets of marginality. Additionally, in data analysis, I hope to rely on another kind of elsewheres – unexpected research questions that could produce new insights into queerness, mobilities, spaces, and homing desires (Nataraj and Offer-Westort 2023; Qureshi and Basi 2018).

3.2. Bowling without friends? Memory work and personhood among Americans in movement

In his meticulous work "Bowling Alone", Putnam (2000) shows how since the 1950s Americans have become increasingly disconnected from social and democratic structures and claims that social capital has been plummeting. A decline in the membership of bowling clubs became an iconic illustration of this change. Putnam's work has been so influential, that since then countless articles in different academic fields have used the reference to "bowling alone" to describe the impact of disintegrating social and democratic networks. For Putnam, particularly, the main causes of disintegrating social networks were balancing work and family life, suburbanization and consequential commuting, and generational change, that is, people of different generations have different levels of civic engagement and technology entertainment – television and internet – that was affecting how people spent their leisure time. Initially, when I started interviews with Americans who have moved from one place to another several times in their lives, I was interested in how frequent movement that I had experienced among Americans has affected personal relations and social ties (potentially disintegrated and weakened?). My initial research questions focused on experiences of movement – education mobility, work mobility, and spousal mobility (migration decisions of a household) as the most common ones. All my interviewees have moved a considerable amount in their lives: usually at first for college, then university, different employments, and some of them for their newly built families that include, for example, either moving to their spouse's location, following spouse's job offers or moving back to their hometown to raise children closer to their parents or extended family. What happens to social ties and a sense of social belonging when one moves? Are Americans bowling alone because of migration? If so, what does that mean to them and their sense of belonging?

However, after conducting a few interviews I noticed a pattern I had seen years ago having informal conversations with my acquaintances: among other things, including practical challenges associated with rather frequent movement, settling in new communities, or trying to maintain relations with their hometowns, my interlocutors were also talking a lot about their past friendships, most frequently from their childhoods or young adulthood (time in college or university). What particularly drew my attention was not the fact they talked about past relationships but how they talked about them. Most of the time friends or even "best friends" / "best mates" were both a subject of the past but also of the present.

For example, Noel (36) who had moved several times in his life due to university and different, often unstable employments, always recalled his "best mate". When I asked when the last time was both of them had seen or talked to one another, he promptly replied: "Oh, it's

been ages!" Noel's best friend lives in a different state and, according to Noel, is also occupied by his family duties that have left almost no spare time for anything else: "You see, friendships are always the last priority. Family and work come first. That's just the way it is. It's the result of capitalism but also how we [Western world – A.Ž.] think of a success, successful life. If you have a good job and family, then that's it, you've won the lottery of success or whatever. It's weird."

Noel was barely the only one who called a person he had not seen or talked with for years his best friend. Although job and family statuses differed (employers or employees, stable or unstable employment, in a long-term relationship or single, with or without children), people talked fondly about their friends whom most of them had not met or been in contact with for a long time. Mobility was only one of the components contributing to friendships that belonged more to the past than the present. Noel's mentioned capitalism and ideals of a "successful" life also played a role. For example, Heather (42) since college had moved five times. She attended state college in her home state, then moved to a different state for her undergraduate studies, then moved to another state for her M.A. studies. After graduate school, she received her first job offer and moved within the same state but a different city where she met her ex-husband and they moved together to another state after her husband was offered a job position. That was neither her nor his home state and they decided to move closer to his family once the children were born. However, after a recent divorce, she told me she feels stuck in a state she does not belong to (her travel outside the state is impossible due to shared custody of their two small children). When I asked which state she would like to move to if she had a chance, Heather replied that either her home state where both of her parents and a brother live, or the state she studied for her master's degree and had her first job: "That was my most favorite place. All my friends … well, my best friend I met during my studies, [she] lives there. We haven't talked to each other in years, from what I hear she's well. Two small kids, just like me. But I felt happy there, I had my community and, well, I guess, those were also very formative years for me, much more than undergrad [undergraduate studies], then I was just a kid. Yeah. And we bonded with each other, we had this girl power back then, you know? No matter how crazy things sometimes went down, we had this… a bit angry womanhood, maybe? I miss that." When I asked Heather who she considers her best friend now, Heather quickly responded: "Oh, Myra, for sure. Maybe I should reach out. It's also scary." Heather mentioned the "formative years" and the effect friendship with Myra had on her. Although not in those exact words, all of my interviewees spoke of their friends and friendships as relations that had shaped them into who they were.

The interlocutors also talked about their best friends and shared experiences as if they had happened yesterday, but in reality, they had not seen or even talked to each other for some time – in some cases five, ten, or more years. Research participants strictly repeated though that these people are still their best friends. Therefore, friendships concerning movement and memory became the center of my research interest.

In the perspective article, the focus is not on answering the question of who or what are friends, that is, I am not interested in the category of friendship as such (Killick and Desai 2010) but rather I hope to contribute to the question of what it means to make friends (Evans 2010) and the effects of friendships on personhood in the context of mobility. That said, mobility has shifted from being a primary focus of the research question to an important context of "making oneself" through time/place and memory. Therefore, although I am referring here to Putnam's work and ideas of "bowling alone"[3], through my data, I focus on memory work as a process related to moving oneself through time and from one place to another to "make oneself". I use the term "memory work" not as ways in which material culture engages in the transmission of memory (see for example (Mills and Walker 2008)) but as how the memory of meaningful past relationships is used to create, sustain, and shape one's personhood. In anthropology the importance of relational frame (Mauss 1979) and collective frame (see, for example (Bahloul 1999; Carsten 2007; Robbins 2019) in sustaining and (re)creating personhood is without a doubt not a new idea. Additionally, "personhood is also constantly negotiated in response to changing circumstances, technologies, and interactions and these shifting and contested understandings of personhood play a key role in shaping individual subjectivity" (Buch 2015). Since migration studies have become a major field in social sciences, there has also been a focus on the effect that migration has on subjectivity and personhood, particularly what it means to be a migrant (see, for example, Retsikas 2007; Fortier 2012; Fioratta 2015; Koven 2013; Rouse 1995). I am, however, interested in past relations – and specifically, friendships that often evade definition even in anthropology (Killick and Desai 2010) – that continue to shape one's personhood in the present time asking what role in this continuity of oneself through meaningful past relations plays mobility?

Both topics – elsewhereness among queer Americans and friendships and memory work among Americans in movement – discussed in this project report currently serve as the starting point for two articles that will be submitted to peer-reviewed journals of social sciences.

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[3] Since this is a work-in-progress, relation to R. Putnam's work and ideas is a possible object of change.

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