



# Traversing the Erotic Oasis: Online Chatting and the Space/Time Continuum

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## Abstract

This study focuses on language in interaction to investigate digital queer geographies. Data analysis focuses on temporal aspects of online text-only chatting in addition to the spatial and discursive. Discourse analysis is applied to interactions in which men who desire men interact in a specific type of place semiotics. Extracts are taken from a corpus of 300,000 words of chatting data that was gathered from online chat rooms. Ongoing dialogues occur simultaneously in these conversations but in layers created by different scales of time, and discursive links are made to yet higher timescales via references to spatialities both within and outside of the chat room. Different experiences of space and time (i.e. chronotopes) intersect periodically in a process in which the constant use of language shapes a negotiation of normativities. The analysis in this study will examine conversations to explore how this particular process relates to the subversion or continuance of homonormativity by the participants, shedding light on the role of language and semiotics in queer geographies.

## Keywords

Chronotopes; critical geography; digital space; language; queer; semiotics

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## Introduction

This study aims to serve as a bridge between three important fields of research: language, space and place; queer geographies; and digital geographies. Social geography has long viewed language as a key factor in imbuing space with socio-cultural meaning and transforming it into place, and in fact it has been acknowledged that words alone can achieve this transfiguration under certain conditions (Tuan, 1991 as cited in Lou, 2014). Thus, it appears obvious that investigations by sociolinguists and discourse analysts have much to offer geographies:

The creation of place is a process that can be viewed as being deeply implicated in speech act and performance. As pointed out by such thinkers as Yi-Fu Tuan, Michael Curry, and Patricia Seed, places are created by a stunning array of performative acts, acts transforming unbounded space(s) into demarcated place(s) (Sullivan, 2011, 1).

These insights about the importance of language to place and space can equally be applied to digital geographies, which have proliferated in the past decade. The relationship between geography and the digital can be usefully organised into three main categories: geographies produced *through* and *by* the digital, and geographies *of* the digital (Ash, Kitchin & Leszczynski, 2016). The first two categories are mostly concerned with the influence of digital technologies on how geography research is conducted on the one hand (i.e. methodologies and epistemologies) and on the other hand how digital technologies mediate the production of material space. The third category examines the digital as a geographic domain in its own right. The current study fits in this final category, specifically amongst studies that focus on ‘spatialities of social media’ (Ash, Kitchin & Leszczynski, 2016) and what Vincent Del Casino (2009, 137) has called “virtual community spaces” (i.e. online meeting points that bridge the ‘virtual’ and the physical).

Drawing inspiration from the framework of geosemiotics (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2003), place semiotics in this study represents the notion, common in social geography and architectural studies, that there is a reciprocal dynamic influence between human action and space and place (Lou, 2014). In the field of social geography, the idea that space and place are performative constructions is commonplace, with many studies exploring this notion (e.g. Bell et al., 1994; Gregson & Rose, 2000; Roth, 2014; Del Casino & Brooks, 2015) but paying little attention to the role of language-in-interaction (small-d discourse) in the production of spaces and places. Conversely, some linguists have examined the relationship between language use and the production of space and place (e.g. Modan, 2007; Lou, 2007; Lou, 2010; Lou, 2016), but unlike in social geography, the performative nature of place has only recently begun to be explored (e.g. King, 2011; King, 2012; Milani, 2013; VanderStouwe, 2015). The aim in this paper is to examine

how a text-only chat room is discursively produced as a sexualised place while simultaneously exploring how its spatial aspects are also inseparable from time.

This aim responds to a call by Schwanen & Kwan (2012, 2045) for more examples in critical geographies of “systematic analysis of how space, time, and social differentiation are mutually implicated”. Thus it explores the important influences and interactions of events that take place on separate but sometimes interlinked timescales. It attends to “the temporal and spatial complexity of processes of social differentiation,” which include a moral dimension of what values are shared or not by people who encounter one another in a social space and what behaviours they think are appropriate or inappropriate (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2012:2051). This is a process that takes place through interaction and language practices as well as through the use of other semiotic resources (Zebracki & Milani, 2017). I also explore the concept of queer semiotics by considering how the resulting analysis might challenge the nexus of space and time, contributing to ‘queer’ as an academic disposition in research (Zebracki & Milani, 2017). Queer semiotics refers to a stance to semiotics that focuses first and foremost on the ways in which non-normative sexualities are often framed as deviant and negotiated in relation to the regulatory structures of normativities (inspired by “queer linguistics” in Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Milani, 2017; Motschenbacher, 2011). Thus queer semiotics attends to semioticity in its multiple modes and their meanings and has an “overt concern with unveiling heteronormative discourses and practices” (Milani 2017, 410). In this sense, it is distinctive from semiotics more generally.

Queer is defined here as an approach that involves the analysis of instances in which normative notions of gender and sexuality are both reinforced and subverted. Rather than treating it as an investigation of a fluid ‘queer space’ that is beyond normativity (Browne, 2006; King, 2011), this approach instead treats space as contradictory in terms of its normativities (G. Brown, 2009). It is instead the *analysis* that is queer, examining sexuality in concert with other normalised processes in order to get a more multifaceted view of power (Oswin, 2008; Podmore, 2013). In this study, then, I align with this idea that sexual geographies must look beyond ‘queer space’, instead “recognising the complicity of all these sites in reproducing various normative beliefs and practices” (G. Brown, 2009, 1498).

I align here with Gavin Brown’s call to research and theorise “ordinary homosexualities” as they are lived and understood both inside and outside of metropolitan centres (G. Brown, 2012, 1069), in this case online. By extending this call to include an online virtual community space being lived and understood by “mature” white men in the southern USA (confirmed at the time via their profiles, which contained photos - see King, 2009), it is possible to contribute to the bridging of digital and queer geographies while introducing a focus on language in use, which remains marginalised in critical geographies in spite of acknowledgments of the importance of language and social interaction. For instance in discussing digital place, Graham & Zook (2013, 78) state:

But, far from uniform and ubiquitous, these digital dimensions of places are fractured along a number of axes such as location, language, and social networks with correspondingly splintered representations customized to individuals' unique sets of abilities and backgrounds. As such, the resulting constructions of place are complex and far from uniform across space, class, or culture.

Even so, language use in social interaction remains largely unexplored in digital and queer geographies. There are indeed studies in geography that have recently addressed digital spatiality in relation to sexuality, for example Del Casino and Brooks (2015) in which interactions on YouTube are examined as negotiated public spaces, similar to the present study (King, 2012). Once again, despite professing to look at "talk" on YouTube, the "visual methodology" deployed in that analysis, although providing many insights about online place, takes language for granted and thus fails to realise its distinctive potential in the semiotics of place. Similarly, Roth (2014), in an examination of the rise of geosocial media (e.g. smartphone dating apps such as Grindr and Scruff among others), brackets linguistic interaction in order to focus more directly on non-browser-driven technologies and geographies produced *by* digital technologies. It turns out that these apps have capitalised on the 'cruising for sex' feature of browser-based chat rooms and taken that feature more physically into the street. Cruising has always been an aspect of interaction in many chat rooms for gay men, and it has always depended upon a sense of geographic proximity and the chance of a local sexual encounter (Mowlabocus, 2010; Roth, 2014). However it is pointed out that although apps such as Scruff curtail textual interactions to some extent, one-to-one communication in the form of private chats still "constitutes the majority of interactions" (Roth, 2014, 2120), with text chatting continuing to serve various important social roles (e.g. Downing, 2016; Mowlabocus, 2010; Nash & Gorman-Murray, 2016).

Obviously, then, there is still a clear role for close linguistic and semiotic analysis of chat spaces, both in geosocial apps and in more traditional browser-based chat rooms that continue to provide community-building services (Downing, 2016; Roth, 2014) and opportunities for "deep, textual relationships" (Roth, 2014, 2120). Chat rooms of the type analysed here therefore represent a hybrid of a community service and geosocial service, conceived before Smartphone technology and serving as an important precursor to geosocial apps. Because of the synchronous nature of chat room interactions, these spaces provide special insight into contestation and negotiation of place and so deserve more attention in digital geographies than they have received to date. In spite of a proliferation of new social media technologies, representations are ultimately policed and managed in the 'nitty-gritty' of turn and talk, and many of these interactions still take place in online chatting. Of course it is extremely useful to be theorising geographies produced (in part) *by* digital technologies – for example, digiplace (Zook & Graham, 2007) and the geoweb (Leszczynski & Wilson, 2013) – and coming to

grips with the language that people are using to layer their impressions onto physical places via these technologies. In addition to these pursuits, geography needs to engage more deeply with sense-making through discourse-in-interaction in digital spaces. Such engagement entails paying closer attention to the micro details of everyday interaction instead of taking them for granted. It is to engage with the semiotic *processes* of the contestation and negotiation of space and time in digital queer geographies instead of just the result. That is, by engaging with micro processes, the macro processes of space-time can be much better understood. This inclusion of detailed analysis of deceptively ‘mundane’ interactions can be achieved via conversation with language scholars and semioticians, a point that has previously been made by Leszczynski & Wilson (2013) who call for greater interdisciplinary engagement.

## Background

The data that form the focus in the present study have previously been analysed in King (2012). That study and its analysis will be summarised in some detail below, but it should suffice to say that my primary argument was that the room’s conversational participants sometimes performatively cited locations in the physical world during conversation in order to create a sense of place online. An erotic atmosphere formed while participants used language to interact with the room’s metaphorical architecture and with various discursive fields, meaning that the room was often performed as an ‘erotic oasis’ (Tewksbury, 2003). In this process there was a reciprocal relationship between place and discourses. It was a process that could not be separated from ongoing identity formation because place and identity were seen to be co-constitutive, with language and discursive practices playing an important role in an ongoing and reformulating relationship.

In terms of identity, one participant attempted to effect changes in how the chat room was being performed, asserting what was arguably a homonormative understanding of space, but he came up against a form of spatial resistance in which the status quo (i.e. the erotic oasis) prevailed. As Koller (2015, 262, my additions in square brackets) has asserted, interactions and discourses “make [spaces] into places in which sexual interaction is permissible or even desirable [e.g. the erotic oasis]...or undesirable...” and thus can become “sites of ideological power struggles”. The aforementioned struggle comprises such a site.

This performative focus during analysis proved to be fruitful within the scope of that paper, but it stopped short of enabling me to more closely delineate the processes of power entailed in *how* performative citations had this effect during meaning making. In other words, in the space of one article, I was able to discern the aforementioned effects but unable to learn or comment on precisely why the participants’ varying perspectives came together *unequally* during the meta-spatial and meta-discursive struggle that unfolded. The analysis begged the question of why one specific formulation of the room (i.e. the erotic oasis) had such ‘staying power’. In the interest of ‘filling out’ a more complete investigation I will in the

present study continue looking at the same data while shifting the analytical scope to include time and also adopting a queer semiotic approach that actively queries norms that position non-normative sexualised spaces as deviant.

As part of this shift in approach, I propose that the answers to the questions above lie at the level of cross-timescale relations. In order to be able to explain more usefully why and how a homonormative contestation of chat room space failed and the status quo prevailed, it is useful to take a ‘temporal turn’ of my own as analyst and implement an approach that permits consideration of multiple scales of time and social formation. Attempting to bring timescales into my analytical fold, I have found it useful to think in terms of Scollon and Wong Scollon’s elements of social space (2004), Lemke’s heterochrony and chronotopes (Lemke, 2000, 2005), and heteroglossic space. In the following section I will outline how I bring these theoretical concepts together, for it is precisely the addition of these concepts that permits queering through a focus during analysis on queer semiotic artefacts (i.e. artefacts that disrupt the regulatory structures of normative sexuality).

### ***Queer Temporality vs. Queering Through Timescales***

Theories of queer temporality have been preoccupied with notions of past, present and future, with various scholars engaged in debate about whether ‘queer time’ involves a hopeful future (e.g. Halberstam in Dinshaw et al., 2007; Muñoz, 2009) or necessitates disregard for the future or rejection of its imperative (Edelman 2007). In these theorisations, linearity of time remains stable (Boellstorff, 2007). In the approach to time that features here, I instead align with the idea that we must “move beyond the weak dichotomy between normative futures and queer (non-)futures” and cease to treat linearity of time as a straw man as part of a temporal turn (Davies & Funke, 2011, 10). In other words, by resisting the urge to identify or align with ‘new’ or ‘special’ queer concepts of time, I am able to demonstrate that it is in the nexus of time, space, and semiotics (in this case particularly language) that it becomes possible to resist normative conceptions of what a space should be like or what should happen there. Instead of trying to theorise how queer ways of being may or may not fit into the future or the past, I am more interested in this study in viewing time as ‘layered simultaneity’ (Blommaert, 2005). I aim to explore how our simultaneous occupation of various scales of time can add nuance to an understanding of why, and how, certain versions of spatiality in a gay heterotopia can compete with homonormative understandings of space. This is an approach that is unconcerned with ‘labelling’ certain temporalities as queer or not, and thus risking the creation of “new orthodoxies” (Halberstam in Dinshaw et al., 2007). Instead it aims to use time scales to assist in understanding the semiotics of space while resisting the drive to label (and perhaps essentialise) those time scales as queer, normative, or any other notion. Instead this is a queer *approach* to time in which “queer moments” can occur at the intersection of different time “cycles” (Boellstorff 2007, 239) or time scales. Temporality is examined in the ‘site of engagement’ (more on this below),

and it is via textual semiotic artefacts that anti-normative stances are enabled during meta-spatial discussions.

In order to shift focus to include a broader range of time scales and to be able to see how activities might link across them, I have found Lemke's formulation of eco-social systems highly useful. Akin to the approach taken by Valentine and Sadgrove (2012) in their examination of geographies of encounter, this theorisation captures spatiotemporal complexity by examining multiple processes across various time scales and geographic contexts. However Lemke's theorisation focuses more directly on mobility, which is both a function and agent of space and time (Cresswell, 2006), making it useful for geographic inquiry. Building on Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope in the novel (1981), Lemke theorises the chronotope as a movement from place to place (i.e. a trajectory) that has become routine, carrying its own timing, activities and pacing and providing a measure of expectation as it gets repeated (Lemke, 2005). An important caveat is that rather than merely being a trajectory in one space, a chronotope is also a *traversal* because it crosses a number of spaces that contain different semiotic artefacts (e.g. words, objects, bodies, structures, or metaphorical architectures). Multiple chronotopes occur at once, with shorter timescale events providing affordances for activities on longer timescales and longer timescale events exerting "downward causation" on shorter timescales and constraining but not fully determining the activities that are likely to occur or that are socially appropriate (Lemke, 2000). If chronotopes take place on different timescales, how then can socialisation take place across timescales?

To address this question, Lemke has developed the principle of heterochrony. Unlike in the physical world, Lemke asserts that in *human* activity it is quite common for longer timescales to influence shorter ones (i.e. via downward causation). This is made possible because of the meanings inscribed in material objects via discourse and semiotics (Lemke, 2000). As meaning-carrying signifiers and signs, these artefacts enable cross-timescale relations by "cueing us in to actions we can perform with them" (Lemke, 2005, 113) and mediating between those timescales and linking events. That is, their use links the immediate 'here and now' with ongoing events in a broader here and now or in the past, helping to shape what we do. For example, a moment of reflexivity (i.e. a reflective perspective on current activity) "...is itself an instance of heterochrony" because as we reflect on broader processes that we are part of, we gain perspective about the shorter timescale roles that we are playing during shorter or more ephemeral processes (Lemke, 2000, 285). These processes of reflexivity are highly relevant to the present study, for in their meta-spatial discussions, the participants link their situated space construction activities with broader processes, and this permits a shaping of the short-term power relations of interaction.

The queer approach I deploy while attending to chronotopes and cross-timescale relations has much in common with what Tom Boellstorff (2007) calls "coincidental time" in contrast to the aforementioned linear notions of 'queer

time<sup>1</sup>. Coincidental time is a conception of time in which various cycles of time co-occur, and therefore it has much in common with the approach I adopt here. His main point is that when time cycles coincidentally align in certain ways the moment is marked somehow. Friday the thirteenth is given as the best example in a Western context, for it demonstrates that we attach significance to the convergence of the cycle of dates in a month and the cycle of days of the week, two cycles that sit on separate timescales. Beliefs have emerged around its significance, yet Friday the thirteenth is not counted in a linear way. That is, “we do not say that ‘this is Friday the thirteenth number 1245’ – the coincidence has simply recurred.” (Boellstorff, 2007, 239). The approach to temporality that I deploy here (i.e. layered simultaneity) allows for a coincidental view of time in which “coincidence, intersection, and admixture” (Boellstorff, 2007, 239) provide a source of transformation and resistance to power. Coincidental time is seen to “burrow”, not simply backward and forward, but also in a circle, up, and down (i.e. cross-timescale relations). Although there is a certain linear logic to timescales and chronotopes, in fact they are not inherently linear. Rather they can reflect cycles or rhythms sitting on different scales and interacting via semiotic artefacts in the ways proposed by the framework used here (Scollon, 2005). Having clarified what I mean by the nexus of time, space, queer, and language, I turn my attention now to how these concepts can be related to social conditions of interaction.

### ***Geosemiotics***

The framework of geosemiotics (Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2003) is useful for the present study because it was developed in order to link studies in social geography to micro-level social interaction and language use (Lou, 2014). Returning to the notion (mentioned above) that reflexivity instigates heterochrony, this point gives rise to another question about the role of subjects and actors in cross-timescale processes. How is a human actor part of this process? To answer this question of actors and action, Scollon and Wong Scollon (2004) have theorised three elements of social space which they have called discourses in place, interaction order, and historical body. These elements interact at what they call the *site of engagement* (i.e. “the momentary focal point of attention in a real-time interaction” – Norris, 2011, 44). The site of engagement is a moment (akin to Boellstorff’s ‘queer moments’) in which various discourses converge (i.e. the ‘discourses in place), some discourses that are circulating on longer timescales, for example the aging of buildings, and some on shorter ones, for example a conversation between friends. These converging discourses can sit unattended in the background (or less attended to) or be in the foreground and fully attended to or more attended to by actors. The social relationship among the actors in a semiotic

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<sup>1</sup> Although, in contrast to my approach here, he does indeed engage in the labeling of temporalities as ‘straight time’ versus ‘queer’ I am less interested in contributing to the potential reification of temporalities as straight or queer and more interested in how timescales and their relations tell us something about power in a heterotopia.



setting is referred to as the interaction order, with the participants' respective memories/experiences, knowledge, skills, and plans making up each person's historical body (Jones, 2010). This model implies that, while navigating various timescales, spaces, and their relationships, actors also bring their own habits and social relationships to bear.

As part of this navigation, actors focus their attention in various ways, as alluded to above. Therefore Jones (2005) has begun to focus on *attention structures*, looking at how actors orient to time and space by paying attention to certain things at certain times. In this way, sites of engagement are not seen as 'objective' moments or locations but rather as *actions* that have become the focus of attention for the participants in that action. They are 'sites of attention'. Or, perhaps a better way to put it is to say that we construct and activate sites of engagement through our attention (Jones, 2005). This concept of the site of attention is useful for the present study because it relates to Lemke's idea that semiotic artefacts can stimulate interaction between chronotopes that occur on various timescales. By attending to certain artefacts that are part of this process of converging discourses, actors can performatively cite certain discourses as part of the process of discourses in place, and they can also instigate cross-timescale relations by making use of the meaning carried in those semiotic artefacts to cue certain actions. In the next section I will begin to give shape to the interaction order of the participants by describing the chat room space in which they meet.

## Setting

As with most browser based chat room interfaces the one focussed on in this study has a public chat area visible to all who log in, but it is also possible to 'pm' another participant (i.e. to "private message" him) and have a one-on-one chat. The data was entirely gathered in the public chat space, although that 'room' is only public to those who have obtained a registered account. At the time that the data was gathered in 2005 there was no restriction or moderation on the registration of accounts, so ostensibly anyone could obtain one. However, the chat room was not fully public because its contents could not be accessed by search engines or web trawlers. The ethics of gathering the data from these semi-public chat spaces compelled me to contact all of the participants by email (1332 of them in the entire corpus) in order to inform them that I had saved certain chats that they had participated in, providing them with the opportunity to opt out of the research if desired (a process described in detail in King, 2009, 2015).

As outlined in the introduction, this is a chat room visited by gay men in the USA for multiple reasons, including to touch base with local friends from their physical lives, to talk with friends whom they only ever see online (and, in some cases, have never met face-to-face), and to 'cruise' for potential sexual partners (i.e. the geosocial function that has come to be so common in Smartphone apps). According to word counts of their contributions and tallies of the dates in which each participant appeared in a chat room, some are frequent visitors, some visit less

frequently, and some perhaps only enter once. In the vast majority of cases their profiles indicated a town or city of abode, and close scrutiny confirmed that these given locales accurately reflected their offline locations. This level of accuracy makes sense when one considers that ‘cruising for sex’ was an important aspect of these spaces. In order to emphasise their availability for offline meetings it was important to be clear about where they were situated and whether or not they were mobile (see also Shaw, 1997). Most were located locally and some lived farther afield though the chat room is named after a city in the southern USA. It is also labelled as a ‘mature’ room and the majority of participants report in their public profiles to be over forty (for a more detailed look at characteristics of the corpus participants, see King, 2009). This was only one room amongst many from which data was taken in order to compile a ‘corpus’ of chat room data. In the next section this corpus research approach is outlined, and its adaptation here will be explored.

### **Research Design**

The original project for which the data was collected was designed according to principles of *Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis*, a methodology in which large amounts of data are gathered and placed in a corpus to be examined by both computer algorithms and the human analyst (Baker, 2006, 2010, 2014; King, 2009, 2015; Partington, 2004). In this case 300,000 words of conversation were gathered from numerous chat rooms on a site that bills itself as an LGBTQ+ social network on a global scale. It provides chat spaces labelled for locations all over the world and also spaces labeled for many gender, sexual identity, and racial categories (e.g. Men of Color and Asian). In the corpus that I created, I focused on gathering data in chat rooms labeled for locations in Australia and the USA, and these were rooms frequented by participants who reported to be men who had sex with men but using a variety of identity categories for self-identification (with most identifying as gay). Although the broader chat platform was certainly used by people who self-identified as transgender and/or non-binary (amongst numerous other categories fitting under the LGBTIQ+ umbrella at the time), none of the participants whose words appeared in the conversations analysed here identified as either transgender or non-binary in their profiles. Indeed, it is safe to say, based on the interactions outlined below in which normative notions of gender stability are reinforced, that the chat room the data were drawn from was largely a cis-normative space. It happened to be named after a city in the southern USA, and all of the users chatting that day identified racially as white in their profiles (i.e. by clicking ‘white’ in the race field), although some black participants were part of that community and chatted there on other days.

The conversation analysed drew my attention because of its rich meta-spatial discussions; thus, the room’s southern USA geographic reach and its particular breakdown of social identities were not factors that influenced its selection. However, these characteristics of the participants are important for understanding the social milieu and are attended to during the analysis when

appropriate. The focus on meta-discourse arose from the data itself, but data collection procedures were not designed to elicit such meta discussions. Rather, the emergence of meta-spatial discussions was unexpected and noteworthy. Hence they became the focus of my attention after corpus compilation was complete.

### ***Material-Semiotic Artefacts***

When asking how meaning and continuity are accumulated across longer timescales made up of many shorter events and activities, the question arises of how we use discursive semiotic resources to construct these continuities and traversals as part of place performance. According to Lemke (2012, 88) it is a matter of “identifying the kinds of semiotic resources and practices involved in constructing meaning along these experiential paths”. He describes such resources as material-semiotic artefacts, defining them as ‘material’ objects that “[carry] significant information across time and space and that serve, through local interpretation, to create coherences between distal events” (Lemke, 2001, 21). So, what do these artefacts look like in practice?

In a study on student collaborative writing online, Blin and Appel (2011) provide valuable insight into how these artefacts can be identified during analysis of online text interactions. In their study, textual semiotic artefacts are used or created by students or teachers in the course of their writing activity and can include messages posted to a group forum and numerous other digital artefacts (e.g. instruction sheets, descriptions, check lists). In the context of the present study, the longer-term activities of participants (i.e. traversing various physical-world locations or performing and producing a chat room) are linked to shorter-term individual goal-oriented ones (i.e. challenging or defending smut talk; contesting or defending ‘public’ sexual practices). This linking is achieved via artefacts such as ‘back rooms’ and discursive sexual references. These resources are deployed to “envision future states or potential developments” of the chat room and its participants’ identities or to “diagnose and explain properties and behaviours” of the same (Engeström, 2008, 129 as cited in Blin and Appel, 2011). In other words the textual artefacts become tools of both performance and contestation, and this demonstrates again why language needs to be part of spatial analysis in geography. It is an important set of semiotic artefacts, and to ignore it is to limit insight. During analysis, therefore, I will place focus on identifying these textual material-semiotic artefacts that enable cross-timescale relations.

### **Data Analysis**

When considering the chronotopes of this chat room and the participants who live them, it is important to realise that there are many routinised and reiterative traversals continually navigated during the process of participating in a chat room. That is, in order to log in there must be a traversal of (and from) the physical space in which the computer is located (e.g. living room, bedroom, the train) across various other online spatialities including the visible (e.g. computer

and software interfaces), the metaphorical (e.g. online ‘rooms’ or ‘worlds’), and the social (e.g. conversations, games) that have a role to play in online spatiality (King, 2011). Each separate participant thus experiences their own chronotopes (i.e. time-spaces) as they traverse these different spaces and some of the chronotopes will be shared in common such as the chat room itself as its own ongoing chronotope with specific trajectories. As the participants interact, different discourses converge and the interaction order influences how the participants relate to those discourses and to each other, with each person bringing ‘his’ own historical body into this online domain (cf Campbell, 2004 on online embodiment), at once a physical and discursive configuration (Adams-Thies, 2012) with all of its habits and assumptions (in this case all the participants are ostensibly presenting as men). Places are performed in certain ways as participants apply indexical meanings to the discourses in place, and cross-timescale relations help to determine what happens and how, but in combination with the agency of the actors.

Queer semiotic analysis in this case means also keeping an eye on the subversion and reproduction of normativities, with a queer research disposition calling into question certain assumptions about the intersections of space, time and meaning. Analysis of Extract 1 below will begin to bring these elements into clearer view. In the extracts presented, the lines follow one another and are numbered according to the complete conversation. Where any lines have been removed, it is reflected in the numbering, and an explanation for their removal is given.

### *Chronotopes, Heterochrony, and Resisting Heteronormativity*

#### *Extract 1 – Interaction order*

- 1 pays2try: Mountain Bear here?  
 2 Jim-K.dwntn: hello mountainbear  
 3 pays2try: 6'5" is tall  
 4 Jim-K.dwntn: the hairy chest is what caught my eye  
 5 pays2try: Well, no pic  
 6 UDPDays: hell, anything over 5'10 is tall to me  
 7 Jim-K.dwntn: he probably has all his teeth :-)  
 8 pays2try: LOL...I bet not  
 9 Jim-K.dwntn: he's from NORTH USA NOT SOUTH  
 10 mountainbear: now now .....lets not all gang up, on the new guy.....on second thought.....  
 11 UDPDays: teenybear!!!  
 12 pays2try: So you have a voice  
 13 Jim-K.dwntn: I'd like to climb the mountain bear.  
 14 pays2try: hey, don't be crude  
 15 pays2try: You will scare him off  
 16 steven880: bi guy [Town1] [Town2] area looking to suck or more  
 17 teenybear: hello guys

- 18 Jim-K.dwnntn:** maybe he likes crude :-)  
**19 Jim-K.dwnntn:** Steven, come get over my knee.  
**20 pays2try:** You guys scare away the nice guys if you talk smut too much  
**21 Jim-K.dwnntn:** we haven't scared you off yet Payz.  
**22 teenybear:** how is everyone tonight  
**23 Jim-K.dwnntn:** oh you said nice guys.  
**24 KYsliderXL:** lol  
**25 pays2try:** Ha ha  
**26 pays2try:** Sure, pick on me when Coast isn't around

In this section of chat we see the arrival of a new participant, *mountainbear*, who immediately draws attention as newcomers often do in this chat room (and indeed in many other rooms in the corpus too - King, 2011, 2012). In the process of greeting him, the participants demonstrate certain key aspects of the interaction order and their historical bodies. There is an ongoing and sustained order in which sexual terms are a standard part of relational practices in the room. Pays2try (aka Payz) and Jim-K.dwnntn (aka Jim) both greet Mountainbear in lines 1 and 2, identifying his height and his hairy chest as points of attraction. Previous corpus analysis has demonstrated via comparison of chat data from numerous Australia and USA chat rooms (King, 2009, 2015) that references to sexualised bodies and body parts in the corpus were significantly more common in rooms named after cities in the USA than places named after Australian cities. These sexual references are also more common for participants who claim to be over the age of 40. In this exchange we see a sample of how this particular chat room and its participants do seem to fit this USA tendency in the corpus. Previous analysis has also demonstrated that bodies and body part terms are most frequently used as part of two categories of action: *Joking/Horseplay* and *Compliments/Flattery* (King, 2015) and this pattern is also observable here. That is, although sexualised bodies and acts are mentioned during interaction, the practices these discursive tools are entailed in are not primarily sexual practices but rather relational ones.

It must be acknowledged, too, that much of this talk is normative in the sense that it does not trouble gender binaries. For instance, the word “guys” is repeated frequently when collectively addressing the room’s inhabitants, and no space is held for other gender identifications, reproducing cisnormativity (which is also reproduced in later extracts via a phallogocentric focus). Also, in their banter they idealise body hair and height as symbols of masculinity, thus reproducing gender normativities, a framing that is yet further supported by the apparent absence of overt references to race in these interactions, a sign of taken-for-granted whiteness in a USA context (M. Brown, 2012).

In line 14 Payz begins to question Jim’s use of sexual innuendo (i.e. line 13 – “I’d like to climb mountainbear”), referring to it as ‘talking smut’ in line 20. This instigates a sequence that will continue into subsequent extracts in which various members including Jim, *browneyedbob* (aka Brown), and *KYsliderXL* (aka Slider) actively perform the room as an ‘erotic oasis’ while Payz periodically contests

these performances (King, 2012). By reading back to conversations recorded in this chat room in the few weeks prior to this interaction, it becomes possible to see that the construction of the room as a place for sex talk has an ongoing history, but Extract 2 represents the initial observable moment in which its actual performance has become a focus of discussion. That is, when Payz contests ‘smutty’ talk the conversation becomes meta-discursive. ‘Smut’ (or sex talk) serves as a material-semiotic artefact that Payz is using as a resource to comment on chat room behaviours. This meta-discourse shifts attention to the ongoing higher-timescale chronotope of ongoing sex talk. By starting this type of reflexive ‘meta’ discussion he instigates what ultimately becomes an incident of heterochrony (i.e. interaction between timescales) as will become clearer in the next extract. Even in line 20 of Extract 1 Payz positions the ‘smut talk’ on a higher level timescale, saying “You guys scare away the nice guys if you talk smut too much” suggesting via his use of the simple present tense that it is an established routine to interact in this way. As outlined above, viewing place as performative has enabled the examination of *discourses in place as processes*. Extract 2 below expands on this type of analysis, further demonstrating the importance of language as part of place semiotics.

### ***Extract 2 – Reflexivity and heterochrony***

\*\*\*\*\*

- 48 **Jim-K.Dwntn:** well, well, we ran another nice one off :-)  
 49 **browneyedbob:** Jim. . . what are you talking about?  
 50 **downunder3:** i didnt  
 51 **Jim-K.Dwntn:** mountainbear wasn't as tough as he seemed.  
 52 **Jim-K.Dwntn:** nevah mind brown.  
 53 **Jim-K.Dwntn:** a Chicago Steamer is what Bush is doing to this country.  
 54 **browneyedbob:** i don't understand  
 55 **KYsliderXL:** he might have just got booted  
 56 **Jim-K.Dwntn:** nah KY, I think he was just a wimp.  
 57 **pays2try:** Or it wasn't worth his time.  
 58 **whitebriefsUS:** Anybody in the North Lakes area?  
 59 **Jim-K.Dwntn:** payz, had he wanted you he would have called you in pvt.  
 60 **Jim-K.Dwntn:** so get over it.  
 61 **pays2try:** I don't mean me.... its no different from a bar... you walk in, and the first thing you see is a back room....lots of guys leave right away  
 62 **pays2try:** You go into a chat room. . . first chat going on counts  
 63 **Jim-K.Dwntn:** most of em head toward that back room.  
 64 **Jim-K.Dwntn:** howdy JohnCub.  
 65 **pays2try:** Believe it or not, most guys don't . . . and you know that  
 66 **JohnCub38:** hello Jim KDwntn  
 67 **Jim-K.Dwntn:** oh sorry, guess I'm the only slut in this room.  
 68 **downunder3:** i dont

- 69: KYsliderXL:** LOL Jim  
**70 Jim-K.Dwntn:** downy, you ARE the back room :-)  
**71 Jim-K.Dwntn:** well we gotta stop and get a drink at the counter before we go to the back room.  
**72 downunder3:** KY you gonna join us tomorrow for dinner?  
**73 cxi450:** anyone wanna chat?  
**74 downunder3:** or 2 Jim  
**75 KYsliderXL:** i just don't know downy  
**76 KYsliderXL:** i am undecided  
**77 Jim-K.Dwntn:** payz, now there's your one who wants to chat.  
**78 downunder3:** you better  
**79 KYsliderXL:** Jim said he was gonna show me his dick  
**80 Jim-K.Dwntn:** KY will be there, I'm gonna show him my foreskin.  
**81 downunder3:** then i would go either lol  
**82 Jim-K.Dwntn:** you ain't gonna see my dick, just the foreskin :-)  
**83 KYsliderXL:** LOL  
**84 KYsliderXL:** that's no fun  
**85 Jonathan2006:** If back room is an issue I did in Paris and spent 5 hours there--

A portion of the conversation has been omitted (i.e. lines 27-47) because the interaction temporarily shifts away from meta-discursive observations and away from Mountainbear. Other topics such as local politics and food are discussed in the interim but finally in line 48 Jim mentions Mountainbear's apparent departure. This leads to some discussion about why he might have left, with Slider reminding the others that Mountainbear might have been "booted" which means that the chat system might have randomly removed him from the room (a common 'bug' in the interface). Finally in line 57 Payz suggests that Mountainbear left because "it wasn't worth his time", thus insinuating that Mountainbear left because of the 'smuttiness' of the ongoing talk (returning to his earlier theme from line 20).

Payz then introduces the material-semiotic artefact of the 'back room' metaphor in line 61, referring to a place in some bars where men go to have sex, a room or a set of rooms that is designated for this purpose whereas the rest of the area is a more conventional public bar space. By doing this he focuses attention on the room as a space, starting a meta-spatial discussion that continues until line 119 (intertwined with other topics). In Line 63 Jim aligns with the positioning of this chat room as a 'back room' and suggests that most participants want it to be this way. In other words, it is part of their historical body and the interaction order and so for Payz to contest it is problematic. The sex talk continues unabated in lines 72-87, acting as a clear reinforcement of the sexualised interaction order, with Downy and Slider discussing their weekend plans in a playfully sexual manner. It must be acknowledged that such open talk about sex is also a normative masculinity performance and so we see here evidence of the simultaneous reproduction and subverting of multiple masculine normativities.

**Extract 3 – Chronotopes and power**

- 86 pays2try:** The point is, it should be a back room, and not the front entrance
- 87 Jim-K.Dwntn:** rub it KY and watch it grow. Talk about a chia pet :-)
- 88 downunder3:** you can see mine KY sans foreskin
- 89 KYsliderXL:** woohoo
- 90 pays2try:** So guys who don't want to see it don't have to
- 91 browneyedbob:** oh my...the morality police
- 92 pays2try:** Geez, its not morality...don't be stupid
- 93 Jim-K.dwntn:** good god, next he is going to quote scripture and verse.
- 94 browneyedbob:** Payz..don't make that mistake again
- 95 KYsliderXL:** LOL
- 96 browneyedbob:** don't
- 97 pays2try:** not saying guys shouldn't be free...you don't go to kindergartens and have sex there either
- 98 Jim-K.dwntn:** nah but I did do it once on the desk of a first grade teacher.
- 99 KYsliderXL:** this room is not the love connection
- 100 Jim-K.dwntn:** and once on the communion table with the preacher.
- 101 pays2try:** Its the mature room..not the smut room
- 102 KYsliderXL:** it's what we all make it
- 103 KYsliderXL:** and i enjoy it as it is
- 104 browneyedbob:** if ya don't like the topic...there is a little red X up in the right corner
- 105 Jim-K.dwntn:** I think Jerry Falwell has started a chat room for you.
- 106 KYsliderXL:** my advice for those who don't is.....
- 107 KYsliderXL:** don't come in here
- 108 BumperSilver:** re hi men
- 109 cruelrambodus:** i'm so hard and big now icamsonline.com/darryn
- 110 pays2try:** Yeah,...and it only takes a few guys without class to keep a lot of guys with class out.
- 111 KYsliderXL:** bitch at the adbots Payz
- 112 KYsliderXL:** now it's the caste system eh?
- 113 browneyedbob:** Payz...what the fuck ever...
- 114 downunder3:** well damn last nite it was nazis
- 115 KYsliderXL:** LOL
- 116 KYsliderXL:** it just gets better huh downy??
- 117 \* Jim-K.dwntn** *opens closet door and says come out, come out Payz wherever you are.*
- 118 downunder3:** yep
- 119 pays2try:** You pretend to not understand, but I bet you do.
- 120 KYsliderXL:** i understand fully what you are trying so hard to convey
- 121 browneyedbob:** honestly, we really don't give a shit what you think
- 122 BumperSilver:** oy



In choosing this physical world architecture of back rooms and front rooms, Payz again intends to use these textual semiotic artefacts to diagnose problems with the room from his point of view, and to envision alternate future states for the chat room (see *Material Semiotic Artefacts* section). Inadvertently, however, this conversational move instead deploys artefacts that conversely link the chat room's shorter timescale chronotope with the higher-timescale chronotope of traversing sex-on-site venues as part of their social lives, something that, based on the ensuing discussion, indeed seems to be familiar activity for many in this chat room. The other participants align comfortably with this 'back-room' positioning and take up the artefact as a desirable one for resisting homonormative, moralistic ideologies about the deviance of sexual permissiveness (i.e. ideologies grounded in heteronormative society), making it very difficult for Payz to effect the change that he so desires. The insights of a recent study of public sex spaces (PSS) lend support to the notion that public openness about sex can be performed by gay men as a way of rejecting homonormative uses of public space (Anderson, 2017). However, interviewees in Anderson's study speak of policing in which participants in public sex are 'encouraged' to "...negotiate PSS in something approaching, if not exactly replicating, a homonormative, discrete and 'clean' manner" (Anderson, 2017, 16). Such demands for discretion and 'clean' behaviour closely resemble Payz's stance, thus I position his contribution as a homonormative intervention. Payz then changes strategy slightly in line 97 by suggesting that Jim would not have sex in a kindergarten, again drawing on a location in the physical world and using it as a textual material-semiotic artefact. Jim once again disrupts Payz's efforts in lines 98 and 100 by saying that he has in fact had sex in a first-grade classroom and on a communion table, thereby suggesting that back room/front entrance distinctions have little impact on his behaviour. Thus Jim himself uses the communion table as another semiotic artefact, linking the here-and-now with a higher timescale chronotope (fictitious or factual) in which he has frequently treated public space as a venue for sex. In this way he subverts the very artefacts that Payz is deploying with hopes of contesting the chat room's smuttiness. Finally in line 102, Slider joins the meta-spatial discussion, pointing out to Payz that the participants 'make' the room through their textual/linguistic interactions, and then goes on to say that if others do not like it they should not enter, echoing Brown's statement in line 104 that they can always choose to leave by pressing the "little red X in the corner" (which closes the chatting window). Thus it is clear that by the end of the interaction Payz seems to have had little impact and little support from anyone else, and the other participants show their resolve to continue performing the room as it is.

## Discussion

As a queer semiotic project, the present study takes power and normativity as its focus and asks how it was that a queer resistance had prevailed in the face of homonormative moralistic judgments about gay cruising and gay sex. Although not theorised identically, there is a parallel here with the findings of Valentine &

Sadgrove (2012) in which multiple processes across different timescales interacted in order to influence the clashing of values in social spaces. A moral power struggle unfolded between those who saw the room as a space in which explicit sex talk was desirable and those who saw such talk as transgressive, and herein lay their queer insubordination; it was liberating for them as a non-normative space, pushing the boundaries that Payz's discourse represented (cf Koller, 2015). It was a queer moment in that sense in spite of the racial and gender normativities that were left unchallenged (i.e. they were white gay men and ostensibly middle class and these aspects remained stable). Its queerness lay in their resistance to homonormativity and resistance to the idea of 'the good gay citizen' (Bell & Binnie, 2000), which Payz's contribution seemed to promote (but more on this later).

The physical world locations of sex-on-site venues provided a semiotic link between timescales of the participants' offline lives and the chat room itself as well as the multiple chronotopes of various discussions that were taking place. They were part of a higher timescale, which means that they strongly influenced what was possible in the 'here-and-now' of Payz's efforts to change the interaction order of the room and the historical body of the participants. By inadvertently linking with higher timescale events, though, Payz undermined his own goals.

Payz introduced a different imagining of the chat room in an attempt to contest the longer-term performance of this space as an erotic oasis, and this tension between imagined spaces and timeframes demonstrates that the chat room was a heterotopia. In other words it was a place where multiple sites were simultaneously represented, tested, converted and inverted (Foucault, 1986). The various circulating beliefs (i.e. discourses in place) and expectations about language use (i.e. interaction order) and longer-term 'selves' (i.e. historical bodies) belonged to separate chronotopes and the struggle between chronotopes was governed by heterochrony. The longer term chronotope of the chat room as erotic oasis, arguably subversive of ideological heteronorms about regulating and moralistically judging sex in certain 'public' spaces, set limits on the extent to which Payz could resist because it was already running as a process and so it set the context (Lemke, 2000, 2001). The other chat room participants stated this very clearly during meta-spatial and meta-discursive discussions, pointing out that they liked it this way and would continue to perform the room in this manner. Those who did not like it did not have to attend. It was a longer-term project related to longer-term online 'selves' that most long-term visitors to the room were happy with (see King, 2012).

By 'paying attention to' back rooms Payz ultimately constructed them as a site of engagement and thus as a site of political struggle between competing discourses (Jones, 2005, 2010). The erotic oasis chronotope came with clear non-homonormative expectations, but Payz disrupted those expectations, creating a reflexive linguistic discussion that ran up against the higher timescale on which a longer-term place-semiotic project sat.

The chat space under investigation was not ‘radically queer’, that is, its social interactions did not represent instances in which discourses incontrovertibly “destabilise naturalised notions of gender and sexual identity and...relativise their absoluteness” (Motschenbacher, 2010, 180). Nonetheless it is germane to consider whether binary judgments about particular practices (i.e. as either queer or not) should even be the goal of a queer perspective:

“A binary conceptualization of Queerness as a matter of being either Queer or not Queer is clearly too simplistic to capture the sexual variability that has been documented. It is, therefore, more productive to assume a continuum of Queerness and to accept that concrete behaviours may be slightly Queer, moderately Queer, highly Queer, Queerer or less Queer than others, etc.” (Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013, 521).

Following this theoretical reasoning, the practices in the space under analysis comprised a type of resistance to homonormativity that was, perhaps, ‘less’ or ‘slightly’ queer. The participants resisted homonormative ideas about how chat room participants should behave and challenged attempted homonormative sexual regulation of that space in moments of insubordination. Payz introduced a discourse grounded in homonormative concepts of erotic pleasure and public space that worked against the prevailing version of the erotic oasis, and so had to be subverted. Payz pressured them to perform the erotic oasis “...in something approaching a homonormative, discrete and 'clean' manner” (Anderson, 2017, 16), policing the interaction in a way that attempted to reinforce “state-constructed hetero/homonormative values and moralities.” It is an attempt to assert ‘the good gay citizen’, a model in which sex is clean, private and therefore respectable (Bell & Binnie, 2000). In response they continued to talk openly about sex and these performances of the erotic oasis were subversive of homonormativity (Anderson, 2017). At the same time, however, they reproduced gendered normativities in their talk (e.g. it maintained the male-female binary and hegemonic masculinity) and there was perhaps an implicit white racial normativity, conspicuous more in its invisibility during interaction than its expression.

Such unevenness in the drawing of intersections between sexuality and other axes of social identity is a common issue in social geographies (M. Brown, 2012). Although the present study does not redress this issue, it does demonstrate that queering can occur (and often does) in spite of complicity with some normativities. The participants’ resistance to homonormativity is imbricated with maintenance of other normativities, and so, far from upturning normativity in a radical way, it instead comprises a modest incidence of defence against certain hegemonic forces of space creation and performance. In the terms of debate in queer geographies, it is what Oswin (2005, 84) identifies as an inevitable level of complicity that arises from a stance of opposition to something, referring to it as “a complicit queerness [that] can still present as a threat.” Although their chat produces an erotic oasis that is perhaps complicit with hegemonic discourses of cis-

normativity and masculinity, it maintains a non-homonormative space – an erotic oasis that pushes the boundaries of what counts as sexualised space under the thumb of heteronormativity. In their resistance to being positioned as deviant, they are engaged in a process that sits on a queering continuum.

## Conclusion

The analysis presented here moves beyond a focus on macro processes to instead examine the micro level, thereby extending the scope of digital geographies. It demonstrates the interactional *achievement* of online space-time via a detailed micro-analysis of ‘mundane’ interactions in which the space is negotiated and contested. Thus we see that a close focus on language as a semiotic mode can extend digital queer geographies by demonstrating *how* macro processes (the most common focus of geographic studies) actually materialise in interaction. By focusing on how time and space are accomplished linguistically, it can be seen that the semiotic detail matters, for it is in the micro level that power emerges and versions of space are contested.

The present analysis has demonstrated that the addition of chronotopes and heterochrony (Lemke, 2000, 2005) into the theoretical framework of this type of study can indeed provide a useful way to investigate power relations in interaction. Layered simultaneity and time scales, combined with a queer, linguistically-aware approach to semiotics, can permit analysts to see how “temporal coincidence [might] rework a hegemony” (Boellstorff, 2007, 234) via the imbrication of complicity and transformation. This means that the power dynamics required to break down the normative practices in this chat room are better understood as temporal and multi-layered, indicating avenues for future research and future activism. This finding supports the notion that geographic analysis of every moment and place “needs a sense of hierarchical competition of clashing temporalities and looking to see whose time is dominant” (Crang, 2012, 2122).

Queer semiotic analysis is itself a traversal of space-time with its own distinctive attention structures that make a valuable contribution to queer geographies. As an illustration, Lemke (2005) asks the reader to imagine walking down the nave of a cathedral and alternatively to imaging how sprinting down the nave would change one’s experience of that space (i.e. what one could attend to and what it could ultimately mean for the person). In a related way, by paying attention to a different set of artefacts (e.g. textual, linguistic ones such as words and metaphors) the analyst who considers cross-timescale relations using micro-level, language-focused queer semiotic analysis is also afforded new insights into how space, movement and time interact. With a recent proliferation of geographies of digital spaces, there must also follow a proliferation of geographies that deploy detailed, micro-level, queer semiotic analysis of the social interactions that take place in those spaces. For it is at this level of analysis that deeper understandings and negotiations of spaces emerge, and we see what it is that actually drives the

interactional achievement of space/time. Such detail is essential to explore in digital geographies if we want to do more than skim the surface.

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