

**MY CO-OP AS A
RESEARCH ASSISTANT
AT THE BRUDNICK
CENTER ON VIOLENCE
AND CONFLICT**

Grayson Peel

Cultural Anthropology

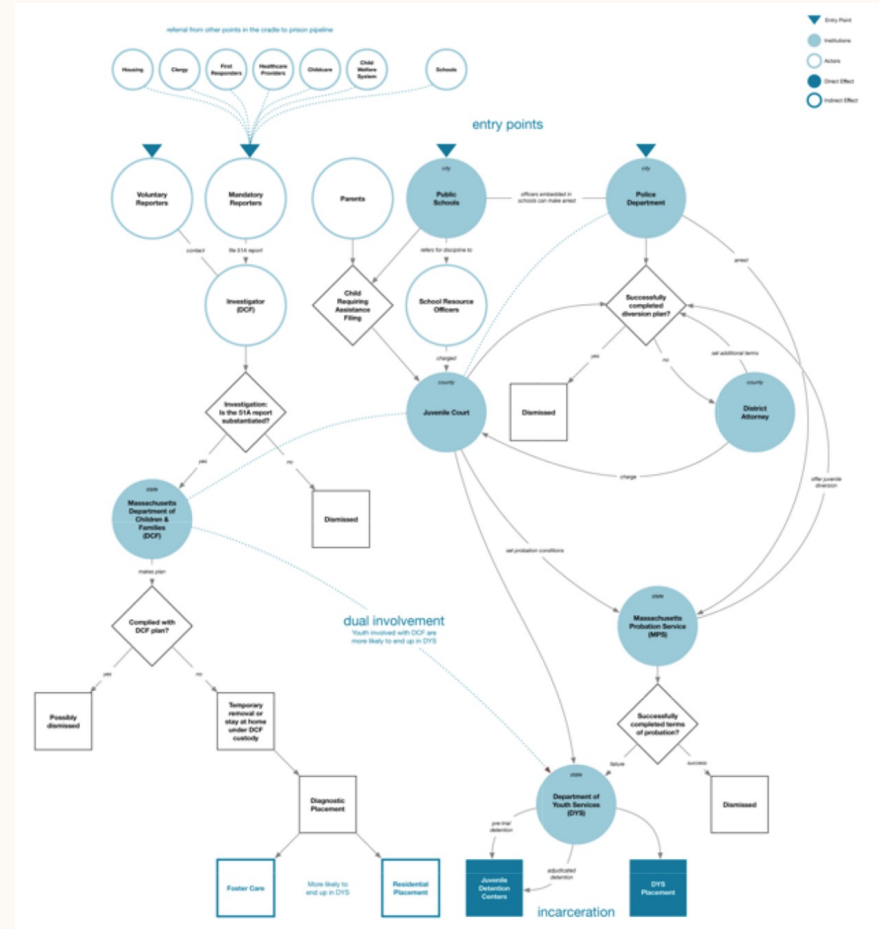
July 5- December 30 2022

WHAT IS THE BRUDNICK CENTER?

- It's a research center at Northeastern dedicated to solution-based research on intergroup violence and conflict.
- The center's director is Dr. Gordana Rabrenovic, a Sociology professor who researches violence and conflict.
- The center is currently working on the Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline (C2P) Project in collaboration with CAMD, the Law School, and activists/advocates outside of NEU.
- The C2P Project seeks to build a holistic and interdisciplinary base of knowledge about the systems that contribute to the mass incarceration of black and brown people living in Massachusetts, in order to inform policy interventions to dismantle the Pipeline.



GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF THE CRADLE-TO-PRISON PIPELINE



DID THE DESCRIPTION MATCH THE JOB?



- I was hired to do typical Research Assistant tasks– like data input and analysis, helping with a literature review, and administrative work– to assist with the C2P Project.
- The job was part-time (20 hours/week) and paid.
- Another essential component of the job is that students are expected to work on an independent research project on a subject of their choosing.
- Based on the NUWorks job description, I expected that I would mainly be doing tasks related to the Brudnick Center’s research.
- I didn’t really end up doing anything at all related to the C2P Project, aside from attending a couple Zoom meetings with collaborators.
- The experience wasn’t what I thought it would be, but I did end up getting a lot out of it!

SO WHAT EXACTLY DID I DO?



- I spent most of my hours each week designing, planning, and executing an independent ethnographic research project about the influence of place on LGBTQ+ identities in a Southern Appalachian town
- I was also able to count any task I did with the purpose of furthering my academic career toward my weekly hours, so I:
 - Applied for a Fulbright
 - Applied (and received) a PEAK Award to fund my research!
 - Applied for a Critical Language Scholarship
 - Applied (and got accepted) to present my research at an academic conference in the spring!
- I supplemented this part-time co-op by working 20 more hours/week on my independent project

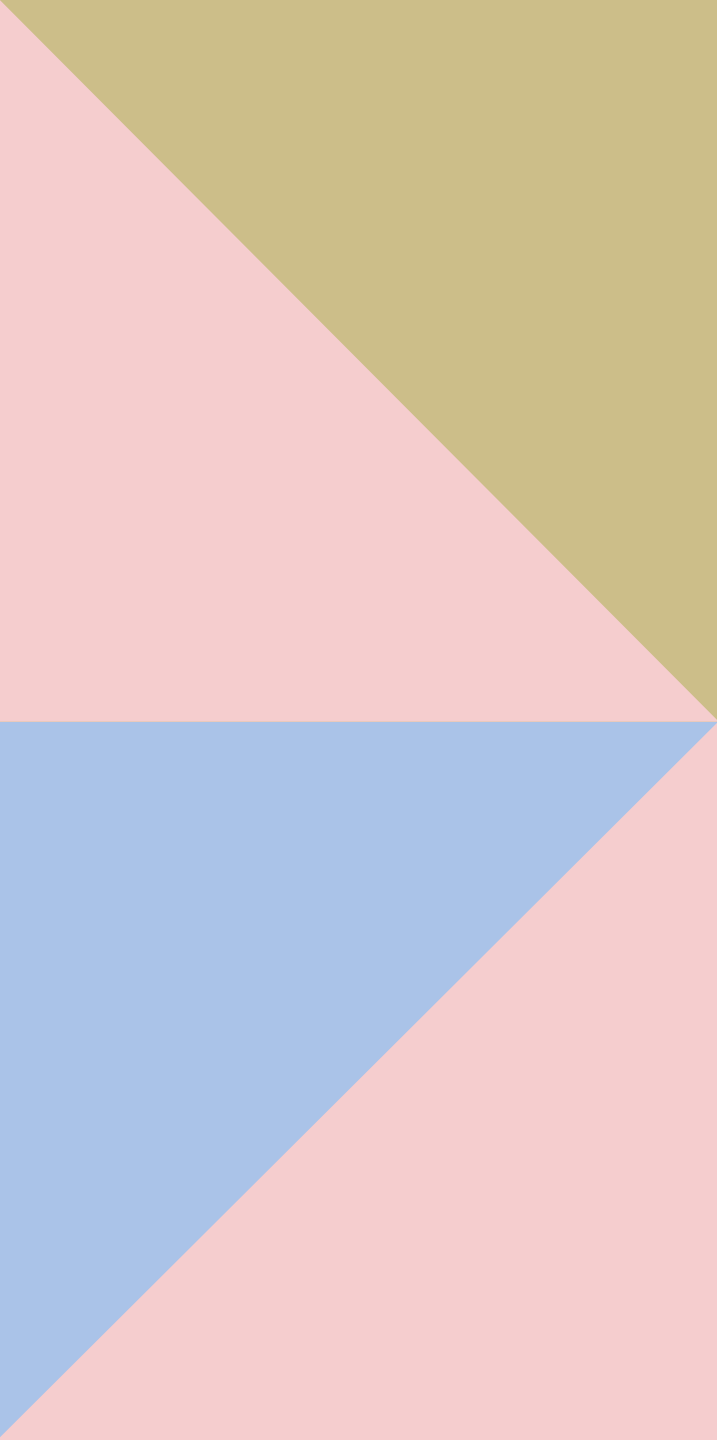




Grayson Peel CSSH'23, "How Place Shapes Queer Identity: A Southern Appalachian Case Study"

Mentor: Gordana Rabrenovic, CSSH, Sociology and Anthropology

This project will use ethnographic methods to investigate how features of a specific place such as demographics, cultural scripts, and ecology influence the identities of LGBTQ+ individuals, groups, and communities, via a case study of a small town in Southern Appalachia. I anticipate finding a unique culture surrounding queer identity that shapes and is shaped by place-based characteristics. Through exploring the ways in which queer people negotiate and express their identities in this specific local context, I aim to challenge the notion of a static, homogenous American queer identity, and to undermine harmful stereotypes about the Southern Appalachian region.



Before I started my co-op, I hoped to learn more about what the actual process of doing social science research was like. I plan on going to grad school eventually and to pursue social science research professionally as a career, but had never done any research before this co-op (outside of a classroom context), so I was excited to work with people who do professional social science research and learn from them.

I was surprised when I was told upon starting the job that I would be working primarily on my own research. Initially, I was pretty disappointed, especially since the C2P Project is so groundbreaking and I really wanted to be a part of it.

But, overtime, I got really into the flow of doing my own research. I did end up learning a lot about what it's like to do social science research- just not in the way I expected to.



Taking a hike at sunset while on a research trip to my fieldsite!

SO WHAT DID I LEARN?

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- That doing social science research is all about adjusting your plans and expectations!
 - Oftentimes, things go the exact opposite of the way you thought they would. Rather than getting down and out about setbacks, it's important to see them as opportunities for growth and strengthening your research design.
- That I really, really like doing research.
- How to apply for competitive academic/professional opportunities (like Fulbright, the CLS, academic conferences).
- How to navigate the IRB review process (this took up A LOT of my time 😊)

BIGGEST CHALLENGE



Hands-down, applying for IRB Approval.

- Doing an IRB application requires you to think about the most unlikely, worst-case, nightmare scenarios that your participants could possibly experience as a result of participating in your research...
- And then, when you've finally managed to list all the horrible things that could happen, how you'll prevent them, and what you'll do if they happen anyways, you have to wait for the committee to get around to reading your application.
- I thought I'd hear back in a month or two, maximum....
- But it ended up taking over 4 months to get a response. Yep- that means I couldn't actually do any recruitment or fieldwork until I had less than 2 months left of my co-op.

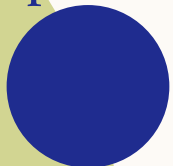


**LIKE I SAID
EARLIER-
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ABOUT ADJUSTING
YOUR
EXPECTATIONS!**

Luckily, I had my wonderful Supervisor, Dr. Rabrenovic, to guide me. She was always willing to help me through the process, reassure me that I had taken all the right steps, and remind me that it's normal for it to take several months to get a response from Northeastern's IRB committee.

And once I did hear back, I only had to make a couple of small changes to my application to get final approval.

Which led to the most meaningful part of my co-op...

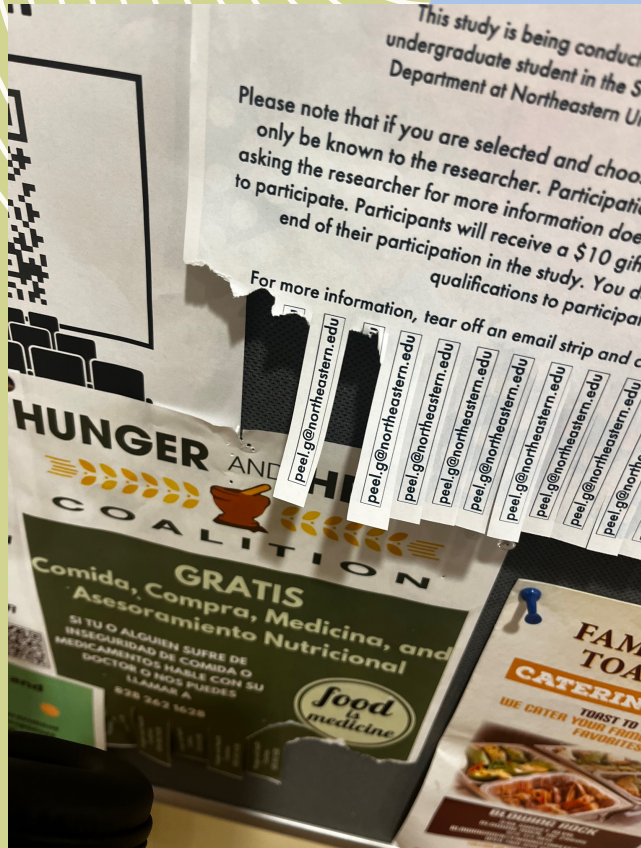


Dr. Gordana Rabrenovic

DOING FIELDWORK!

I got to experience what it's like to be a “real” anthropologist- what I'd been learning about and looking forward to in all my classes beforehand.

Doing fieldwork comes with a whole other set of challenges, but getting to talk to people about their experiences as queer and trans people in Southern Appalachia– a topic I'm very passionate about, and personally invested in– made all the hard work I did to get the clearance to do this research well worth it.

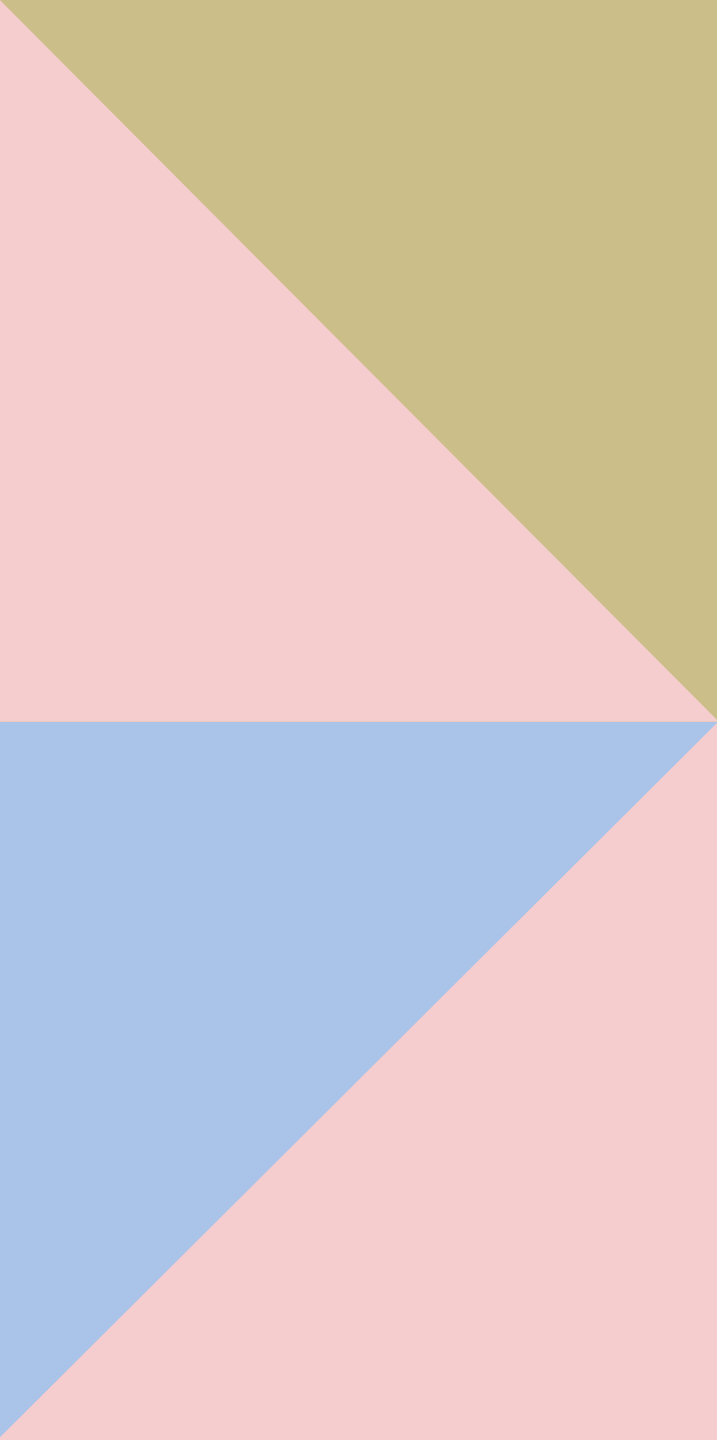


It was great to see some of my email tabs being torn off of a flyer I put up in a building at my fieldsite 😊

I wish I had known that I would be working mostly independently and wouldn't have much social interaction, outside of talking to Dr. Rabrenovic, at the office. At times, I felt challenged and isolated, but I stayed involved with clubs, spent more time than usual exploring the city, and got into new hobbies to compensate. I also made friends with some grad students on the same floor of Renaissance Park that my office was on, one of whom hired me as an RA this semester.



Me in the office.



Both the positive and negative aspects of my co-op experience were probably pretty similar to what I'll experience in graduate school in the future.

After I graduate this semester, I hope to find a social science research-related job that incorporates the research skills and methodology that I practiced during my co-op.

In the (somewhat) near future, I also plan to pursue a PhD.

Thanks to this experience, I know that I very much enjoy getting engrossed in a topic and conducting research on it largely independently- a good indicator that working towards building a career in academia is, indeed, a good career path for me.

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN IS MY DREAM SCHOOL FOR EARNING MY ANTHROPOLOGY PHD IN THE FUTURE.



HOW DID MY EXPERIENCE SHIFT MY PERSPECTIVE?

While I didn't end up working on the Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline Project, simply attending meetings during which collaborators discussed the goals and contents of the project greatly advanced my understanding of the inequalities *perpetuated by*– and systems *perpetuating*– the Pipeline. First and foremost, I developed a much more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the factors that contribute to mass incarceration, both in and beyond Massachusetts. I learned that schools– by far, the most well-known and widely accepted contributors to the Pipeline– are just one piece of it. If we truly want to dismantle in the Pipeline, we must pay equal attention to the child welfare system, housing authorities, and even healthcare providers, all of whom bear a great deal of responsibility for the crisis of mass incarceration.

Discussions surrounding the C2P Project made me realize me realize how multifaceted, ingrained, and seemingly indestructible the Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline is. I now have even more respect for the non-profit workers, advocates, academics, and (most importantly) formerly incarcerated activists who are doing the difficult and incredibly exhausting towards dismantling the Pipeline. The determination of the folks working on the C2P Project to supersede institutional barriers to their research, and their refusal to make concessions that could compromise the radical goals of the project– have deeply inspired me. For example, in one meeting, we discussed Northeastern's attempts to pressure them to substitute the term “pipeline” with something less charged; something that inspires less discomfort. The group unanimously agreed that making such a change would detract from one of the Project's most critical points: that we *should* be uncomfortable with black and brown children being funneled into prisons, and that something must be done about it. I will strive to be just as resolute and unfaltering in my own future research.

THANKS FOR READING!

