Language Ideologies in Transgender Communities In the U.S. South

Archie Crowley

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LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES IN TRANSGENDER COMMUNITIES IN THE U.S. SOUTH

by

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DEDICATION

For trans people, with all my t4t love.
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Community is my lifeblood, and this dissertation would not have been possible without the time, support, and care from my loved ones across various communities.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how metalinguistic discussions within transgender communities in South Carolina are shaped by experiences, identities, and ideologies related to intersecting social dimensions, specifically, gender, age, race, and regional identity. Based primarily on 20 ethnographic group and individual interviews with 41 transgender individuals living in South Carolina, as well as over 24 months of participant-observation in two trans organizations, the analysis illustrates how trans South Carolinians simultaneously navigated changing norms of community language use, expectations of regional linguistic practices, and mainstream discussions of trans linguistic affirmation. I draw on these sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological methods to examine how discourses about linguistic choices reproduced and challenged ideologies of language, gender, race, age, and region that circulated broadly in the United States, and I offer four main findings. Chapter 4 illustrates how participants positioned trans-inclusive language practices as aligned with Southern norms of linguistic respect, despite the everyday challenges they faced living in this region. Chapter 5 shows how participants reproduced stereotypes of linguistic age-based differences that circulated beyond trans communities, such as the “old curmudgeon” and the “young innovator.” Yet participants also worked toward mutual, intergenerational understanding about language practices within trans
communities. In Chapter 6, I discuss how linguistic innovation from Black trans communities was tied to racialized ideologies of youth identity, “slang,” and “coolness,” while linguistic innovation from white trans communities was understood as shaping standardized norms. Finally, Chapter 7 illustrates how members linguistically created trans joy to sustain trans life by using language as a tool for both personal identification and for political representation and action. This dissertation argues that a fuller understanding of language within a trans linguistic framework requires that we consider how gender, region, age, and race can intersect as trans identities and experiences are shaped.
“every day I depend on how we language me”
— TC Tolbert “in our lifetimes”

Dum spiro spero
“While I breathe, I hope”
— State Motto of South Carolina
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade in the United States, increased public visibility of transgender (or trans) and nonbinary people has cultivated a complex sociocultural context of their growing-yet-contested mainstream recognition and their linguistic affirmation. There has been increased representation of trans people and communities in mainstream media, an influx of community support groups and resources, and progress in gaining legal protections from discrimination (Nownes, 2019; Stryker, 2006, 2008). Yet this recognition has catalyzed broader backlash against trans people’s participation in public space, including limited access to public restrooms, restricted pathways for healthcare, and anti-trans violence (Grant et al., 2011; Seelman, 2014; Whittle et al., 2007). In debates about trans people’s existence in public space, language use has been a key topic, and these debates reveal broader assumptions or working ideas about how people think language works or should work.

In discussions of trans inclusion, the topic of language figures prominently in two ways. First, trans people recognize that language can be a source of marginalization, for example, when pronouns or labels are used in ways that misgender transgender people (i.e., the use of an incorrect gender pronoun or gender identity label) (Bradley et al., 2019; Conrod, 2022) or erase transgender identities (i.e., the maintenance of a gender binary in greetings like
“ladies and gentlemen”). The use of language in these ways can be harmful for the mental health of transgender people, as they are forced to navigate unwelcoming or hostile environments (McLemore, 2018). At the same time, trans people observe that language is a crucial resource for demonstrating respect for trans individuals, for both gaining community recognition (Zimman, 2018a, 2019) and challenging hegemonic cisgender ideologies.

Second, as public and private understandings of transgender identities shift, multiple linguistic variants have come to circulate, such that some trans activists have attempted to create a unified linguistic “standard” (Zimman, 2018a). Examples of standardizing practices include the normalization of pronoun introduction practices (e.g., encouraging self-description such as “I use he/him pronouns” among both transgender and cisgender people), the circulation of online resources that specify trans terminology (e.g., glossaries that define terms like genderqueer), online manuals and statements that prescribe lexical usage (e.g., “One should say transgender person; one should not say a transgender or transgendered person”), and institutional acknowledgement of neopronouns such as ze/hir/hirs or singular they, reflected by their inclusion in dictionaries and publication style guides and their official “word of the year” recognition by the Linguistic Society of America in 2015 and Merriam-Webster in 2019. Given the importance of language issues for trans recognition and legitimation, metalinguistic discussions are common in trans communities.

Mainstream discussion of trans language often elides the fact that trans communities are in fact heterogenous, and they lack widespread consensus on language use. Not only has terminology used to talk about gender and sexuality continued to change, but multiple axes of difference, such as race, regional
identity, gender, sexuality, and age, have shaped language norms within trans communities. Thus, to understand trans language, it is essential to explore how language becomes contextualized within specific environments and experiences. In this dissertation, I examine what it means to be trans and to use language from specific social locations within trans communities.

The language ideologies that I describe may resonate with those that circulate nationally, but there are also aspects that are particular to the linguistic practices of transgender individuals in South Carolina. Despite the increased public visibility of U.S. trans communities, most research documenting trans life has focused on large metropolitan areas such as San Francisco and New York, perpetuating a metronormative narrative of trans life (Stone, 2018). Consequently, the specific linguistic challenges of trans recognition in the Southeastern United States remains underexamined. Trans individuals negotiate pervasive binary gender ideologies, such as those that are presupposed in common Southern terms and titles, including sir, ma’am, Mister X, and Miss Y. More generally, queer and trans life in the South is shaped by barriers to health resources, overt homophobia and transphobia, and threats to safety in ways that may be palpably different from trans life in other regions of the United States (Barton, 2012; Griffin et al., 2019). At the same time, while the popular imagination holds that queer and trans people in the South desire to escape to urban enclaves in the West and the North, a growing body of sociological research has explored how trans people have chosen to stay and make their lives in the South (Abelson, 2019; Rogers, 2020b). Trans people who have stayed in the South must engage in complex strategies of cultural and linguistic navigation. Thus, it is crucial to attend to the linguistic ideologies of trans people in the U.S.
South, as they provide a unique perspective in navigating both regional and
gendered language ideologies.

Age is also a crucial and complex social dimension that I examine as it
intersects with trans ideologies of language. Given that norms of trans language
have continuously undergone shift, younger and older members of trans
communities sometimes find themselves at odds concerning what language
should be used to talk about trans identities. Evaluations about younger and
older trans people mirror broadly circulating stereotypes: older adults are
described as maintaining “outdated” language norms (Hummert et al., 1994) and
youth are seen as developing new “overly complicated” terminology (Elbe, 1996;
T. Labov, 1992), which is regularly critiqued for being overly complicated or for
ruining the language (Milroy & Milroy, 1999). Further, a trans person’s
experience with language might be shaped by their experience of “trans age,”
(Pearce, 2018) given that trans people often navigate life milestones at different
times and rates relative to cisnormative expectations. Attending to
intergenerational ideologies within trans communities complicates
sociolinguistic perspectives about language, age, and intergenerational attitudes
towards language change.

Finally, discourses about trans language are necessarily mediated by
ideologies of race, especially as these ideologies manifest in the Southern United
States. First, within the U.S. South, discourses of race often focus on experiences
of race and racism along a Black/white binary (Pereat, 1998). Second, discourses
about language and race within trans communities have recently begun to attend
more closely to issues and processes of linguistic appropriation of African
American Language by non-Black LGBTQ+ individuals. Despite this, many trans
communities are centered around the perspectives and experiences of white trans individuals, and non-white trans individuals face intersecting oppressions of both racism and transphobia, within and outside of transgender communities (Howard et al., 2019; Singh, 2013). It is therefore important to address the intersecting ideologies of race that are reproduced in discussions about trans language, linguistic innovation, and appropriation. Given the heterogeneity that characterizes trans communities, this dissertation argues that a trans linguistic framework requires examining how language is shaped by trans identity and experience at the intersection of gender, region, age, and race.

1.1 Theoretical Approach

While sociolinguistic scholarship has demonstrated how trans people use language in creative ways to subvert gender norms and to construct gendered identities, notably absent are studies that investigate language ideologies—that is, culturally shared sets of beliefs about language, language use, or language users (Gal & Irvine, 2019; Kroskrity, 2004; Silverstein, 1979)—that motivate or even sometimes serve as rationalizations for these usages within trans communities. Given both the importance of language for the affirmation of trans identities and the increasing awareness of trans people in U.S. public discourse, metalinguistic discussions within trans communities about linguistic practices are common. Trans individuals evaluate, rationalize, and motivate certain linguistic choices, and these discussions are key sites for the circulation of ideologies of language. Thus, a language ideological approach allows for an investigation into how certain forms of “trans language” are negotiated within trans communities.
I draw on sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological methods to shed light on how discourses about language in local trans communities reproduce and challenge broadly circulating ideologies of language, gender, and identity in the United States. Language ideologies function as taken-for-granted systems of belief about language (Rumsey 1990; Woolard and Schieffelin 1998), and they are adopted by members of various trans communities in order to rationalize and evaluate language choices (Silverstein, 1979), including why particular words are felt to be more “correct” than others, in what contexts they are felt to be more “appropriate,” and who can claim the authority to define their correctness or appropriateness. Trans community members become socialized into these practices and ideologies through participation in online communities as well as through local, in-person community groups and friendships with other trans people, where metalinguistic discussions about terminology, pronouns, and discursive practices are common.

To address these questions, I employ multiple methods of data collection, including two years of participant-observation in two trans organizations in Palmetto City¹, South Carolina and ethnographic interviews with 41 transgender people living in South Carolina. I analyze the interview data using a qualitative method of discourse analysis, allowing me to identify local discursive strategies for rationalizing lexical and grammatical choices.

1.2 Overview of the Dissertation

The following two chapters provide an overview of the theoretical and ethnographic contexts of my research. Chapter 2 discusses the relevant

¹ This is a pseudonym.
sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological scholarship and situates my study within these frameworks. Chapter 3 introduces the ethnographic context of transgender and nonbinary communities and experiences in the South. Following this, I describe my methods of data collection and analysis, address my terminological choices, and reflect on how my relationship with the communities where I conducted my research, as both a member and a researcher, informed various aspects of my analysis, including the data I was able to collect and the perspective I brought to the analysis.

The subsequent four chapters examine intersections of language ideologies and identity within conversations among transgender South Carolinians. Chapter 4 focuses on language ideologies of inclusive language and politeness faced by trans and nonbinary South Carolinians. I suggest that as trans South Carolinians navigated expectations of using appropriate Southern politeness norms, they positioned trans-inclusive language practices as not oppositional to, and in fact, aligned with Southern norms of linguistic respect. Chapter 5 explores intergenerational evaluations of language practices within transgender communities. I address how participants’ evaluative stances towards both younger and older trans speakers in some ways mirrored intergenerational ideologies within cisgender communities, such as the reproduction of the stereotype of older speakers as outdated and younger ones as innovative yet overly complicated. Despite these tensions, participants expressed a desire for positive intergenerational relationships. In Chapter 6, which discusses racialized constructions of linguistic innovation, I examine how throughout the interviews innovation from Black trans communities was tied to ideologies of youth identity, “slang,” and “coolness,” while innovation from
white trans communities was understood in terms of standard language norms. Despite conversations about linguistic appropriation of African American Language forms reaching broader levels of awareness, specifically within queer and trans communities in the U.S., participants’ descriptions of innovative forms of trans language reproduced hegemonic ideologies of language and race. In the final analysis chapter, Chapter 7, I address the ways in which language was used as both part of personal self-discovery as well as part of political projects to protect and educate. These two distinct goals may seem to be in tension, yet I argue that both uses of language were used in the pursuit of sustaining trans life and creating trans joy.

In Chapter 8, I conclude with a discussion of the findings and their contributions to sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological understandings of language and gender as well as language ideologies. I propose that taking an intersectional approach to language ideological research is crucial in understanding how ideologies of language and gender never operate separately from those of region, age, and race. Finally, I address some of the limitations of the project, suggest avenues for future research, and conclude with a reflection on what it means to do trans linguistic research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This dissertation lies primarily at the intersection of adjacent academic subdisciplines: sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. Specifically, I contribute to both a trans linguistic framework in the context of broader disciplinary conversations about gender and language as well as to scholarship on language ideologies as it relates to trans life and language in the U.S. South. To lay out the existing research that I build on, this chapter is divided into four parts. First, I provide an overview of scholarly work documenting the lives and experiences of queer and trans people in the U.S. South. Second, I turn to sociolinguistic understandings of the relationship between language and gender, focusing on the emergence of a trans linguistic framework, the uptake of theories of intersectionality, and the consideration of linguistic activism and change. Third, I adopt a theoretical framework informed by linguistic anthropological scholarship on language ideologies, or the underlying social and cultural beliefs that organize users’ understanding of language. Finally, I address what combining these bodies of literature offers when exploring trans linguistic communities and practices.

2.1 Queer Life in the U.S. South

This project centers on the lives and language of transgender people living in South Carolina. As I will discuss in Chapter 3 (Section 3.6.2), not all of the participants in the interviews understood themselves to be Southerners, however, they all recognized South Carolina to be a part of “the South” (see
Section 3.5.3). This region was viewed, and continues to be viewed, as geographically, historically, and culturally distinctive from the rest of the United States, even if it was recognized as having disparate cultures and norms within it (e.g., those of the “the deep South,” “the coastal Southeast,” or “the Carolinas”).

A broadly circulating narrative about the South that has circulated in popular culture for decades is that it is a uniquely racist, bigoted, and conservative region of the United States, in so far as it is imagined as a white, Christian South. The South indeed must grapple with histories of slave systems, segregation, and Jim Crow laws, and the ongoing celebration of the Confederacy in state flags and monuments. However, within other regions of the United States, the South functions as “an easy repository for all that is backward and hurtful in the United States, past and present” (Law, 2001, p. 3), and in turn elides histories of racism, colonialism, and genocide across the entire United States.

There is a related narrative that because of this hostile, conservative climate of the South, queer and trans people do not exist there, and if they do, they desire to leave. These narratives of the South as being antagonistic to queer life are not only taken up and shared by residents of other regions, but sometimes taken up by Southerners themselves. In his reflection on growing up in the South as a gay child, moving away, and coming back, Kevin Jennings (2013) grapples with his own uptake of the narratives about the South:

“I came back to the South now with new eyes, eyes that saw that the mythic, monolithic Southern identity that I grew up with has always been challenged, by Blacks, by women, by non-Christians, by queers, all of whom fought for and found space in from themselves in the South – almost always a contested space, sometimes a tightly contained and constrained space — but there nonetheless, always there. You just had to look.” (p. 410).
Jennings’s reflection highlights one thread across scholarship on queer life in the U.S. South: the desire and motivation to show that *we are here.*

Research across disciplines such as history, geography, and sociology all draw attention to the ways in which, despite narratives that construct the South as inhospitable to queer life, queer people in the U.S. South are able to find community, build resistance, and simply exist in the region. Howard’s (2001) influential book on gay men in Mississippi drew attention to the ways in which queer life was often shaped around and through local institutions of small-town life, such as churches, farmhouses, and sports venues. Other scholarship has demonstrated that queer and trans people in the South find safe places to explore identity through drag performance (Baker & Kelly, 2016). Further, despite views of the South as dominated by conservative political leadership, there has been an array of projects of queer and trans activism and resistance working for viable futures for queer life in the region (Pope, 2021). While early writing on queer life in the South primarily focused on the experiences of gay and lesbian Southerners, there has been an increasing focus on the lives of trans people in the region. Rogers (2020a) and Ableson (2019) have both explored the experiences of trans men, their relationship with Southern regional identity, and the reproduction of normative expectations of masculinity. In sum, this work has countered the narrative that queer people do not exist in the South and has highlighted the myriad ways in which queer people in the region are making community and connection with one another.

A key method that has been utilized to document the lives of queer people in the South has been the collection and dissemination of oral histories and personal writing about the queer experience in the South. For example, E. Patrick
Johnson’s two pivotal oral history collections highlight the voices and narratives of Black gay men and Black queer women in the U.S. South (2011, 2018). The collections feature experiences of coming out, navigating religious norms, building family, and experiencing racism and homophobia as told in the voices of Black gay and lesbian Southerners. Further, edited volumes such as *Queer South Rising: Voices of a Contested Place* (Whitlock, 2013) and *Y’all Means All: The Emerging Voices Queering Appalachia* (McNeil, 2022) blend scholarly and personal reflections on queer life in the South, creating space for the voices of queer and trans Southerners to be presented and shared.

Another substantial contribution of research on queer life in the South has been to destabilize associations of queer life with the large, urban centers in the U.S. West and North. Popular conceptions hold that queer and trans people from the U.S. South desire to leave the region for such urban enclaves—that the only viable trajectory for queer life is to move to “the big city” to be among a gay community. Media representations of queer communities primarily center on people living in large cities, which often have “gayborhoods” with access to gay bars, pride parades, and large groups of visibly queer people. This metronormative (Halberstam, 2005) narrative of queer life in the United States elides the experiences of queer and trans people who, both in the U.S. South and elsewhere, reside in suburban and rural communities. Gray’s (2009) book *Out in the Country* challenges narratives of “visibility” and attends to what resistance, community, and connection look like beyond such metronormative assumptions of queer life.

Importantly, while popular imagery often equates Southern life with rurality, there are Southerners who do live in more metropolitan areas across the
region. At the same time, it is true that most of the cities across the U.S. South are smaller than the cities that are represented in broader scholarship on queer communities. As such, the focus on “great cities” such as New York, Los Angeles, or San Francisco, omits the experiences of queer people in “ordinary cities” (Stone, 2018) across the U.S, including South Carolina’s two largest cities, which have 151,000 and 137,541 people respectively.

A final significant impact of scholarship on queer Southerners has been the documentation of institutional discrimination and barriers to healthcare access in the U.S. South, often through mixed methods and quantitative research (see Caldwell et al., 2022; A. H. Johnson et al., 2020, 2022; A. H. Johnson & Rogers, 2020). This body of work recognizes that queer and trans people do live in the region, and yet, there are still a wide array of barriers to access, reinforced both by regional cultural norms as well as homophobia and transphobia within medical systems. Through large surveys and quantitative data, this work provides research to support advocacy to improve the wellbeing of queer and trans people in the U.S. South.

This dissertation follows the lead of these broader projects in order to represent the experiences of transgender people in the U.S. South. Through interviews with trans people living across various regions across South Carolina, in cities, towns, and rural areas, this project contributes to scholarship that challenges the metronormative, “great city” representation of trans life. Finally, I join the cross-disciplinary work that recognizes both the joys and challenges of queer and trans life in the U.S. South.
2.2 Language, Gender, and the Emergence of Trans Linguistics

The linguistic subfield commonly labeled “language and gender,” like some of its neighboring subfields in sociolinguistics, has grappled with the question of how relations of power are shaped not just by one’s social group membership but the language a person uses (or is expected to use) on the basis of that membership. However, as a pioneering area of research, early understandings of the relationship between language and gender were characterized by shortcomings. As a result, the study of language and gender has undergone significant transformation over the past fifty years, setting the stage for the trans linguistic approach that I take in this dissertation. In this section, I offer an overview of three major transformations that are reflected in current scholarship in this area. First, scholars witnessed a disruption of the gender binary that was taken for granted in earlier research. Second, normative positionalities ostensibly embodied by early scholars—for example, cisgenderness, heteronormativity, and whiteness—became decentered as the discipline diversified with an attention to intersectional approaches. Third, language came to be recognized not just as a marker of identity or even a resource for identity construction but also one for activism.

2.2.1 Approaches to Language and Gender Research

Robin Lakoff’s (1973) description of “women’s language” reflected an important early effort to understand the linguistic conundrum that some women have faced—if she speaks as she is expected, then she is viewed as lacking authority, but if she speaks with authority, she is viewed as embodying gender inappropriately. This feminist perspective set the stage for a number of different sociolinguistic studies that attempted to make sense of ostensible linguistics
“differences” that Lakoff identified between women and men. Did women speak differently from men because they were powerless (Crosby & Nyquist, 1977; O’Barr & Atkins, 1980)? Were women and men socialized into different gendered communication styles (Maltz & Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1990)? Did such differences apply to non-English language communities (Yukawa & Saito, 2004)?

While this research that explored gender “differences” in language importantly critiqued systems of gender and power, it continued to reify, and often naturalize, binary gender categories. In response to the limitations of this approach, some scholars adopted a social constructivist approach, treating gendered language not as an abstract system linked to binary gender categories but as a “practice” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992) through which multiple kinds of gendered personas could be constructed (see also West & Zimmerman, 1987). According to researchers who have adopted this approach, language is not evidence of purported gender group membership but a resource for “indexing” gendered social meanings, including stances, acts, and activities associated with particular gender categories (Ochs, 1992). In other words, an individual’s gendered social positioning is an outcome of discourse, not its source (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004a).

It was in this framework that early research on language used by gender variant communities emerged, primarily in non-U.S. contexts, such as research on the linguistic practices of *hijra* in India (Hall, 1995), Brazilian *travesti* (Kulick, 1998), and *bakla* in the Filipino diaspora (Manalansan, 2003), as well as genderqueer speakers of Hebrew (Bershtling, 2014). This work crucially expanded understandings of language and gender outside of the gender binary
and Western contexts, yet also in some ways continued to frame gender diversity as an exotic or ‘other.’

Research within the context of the United States and English-speaking trans and gender diverse communities has addressed how linguistic features at various levels, including phonetic features (e.g., pitch and /s/ production), lexical items (e.g., body part names and pronouns), and semiotic systems (e.g., linguistic and aesthetic style), are important resources for naming trans identities and for constructing and communicating these identities to the world. Sociophonetic research within trans communities has explored how the gendered voice is constructed, performed, and heard (Calder, 2019; Zimman, 2012). Lexical analyses have shown how labels and pronouns have allowed non-normative gender individuals to claim linguistic agency over their own experiences of gender (Edelman & Zimman, 2014), as well as to challenge and reclaim pathological terminology ascribed by doctors and psychologists. For example, early usage of the term transgender in the 1980s is generally attributed to trans activist Virginia Prince as a way to name identity categories that were considered to fall somewhere between transvestite (a term coined in the 1910s by Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld to refer to temporary changes in dress) and transsexual (a term popularized in the 1950s by Dr. Harry Benjamin that emphasized medical intervention, specifically genital surgery) (Stryker, 2006, 2008). The focus on gendered category labels emphasizes how social labeling practices, which sort people into recognizable social kinds, play a central role in shaping and maintaining—rather than merely reflecting—gendered categories (McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 71). Finally, a robust body of work on singular they and neopronouns addresses both syntactic and language-ideological debates about
language change (Bodine, 1975; Conrod, 2022; Hernandez, 2020; Konnelly & Cowper, 2020).

The adoption of queer theory in linguistics (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004b; Leap & Boellstorff, 2004; Livia & Hall, 1997; Podesva et al., 2001; Zimman et al., 2014) has been essential in challenging normative linguistic assumptions of sexuality and gender. Queer linguistic work centrally critiques constructions of heteronormativity, and constructions of other forms of normativities (e.g., homonormativity and transnormativity), as part of a “broader interrogation of structures of normative authority and regulatory power” (Leap, 2015, p. 662). Work within lavender linguistics and queer linguistics has been central in exploring how categories of gender and sexuality are discursively constructed (Leap & Motschenbacher, 2012; Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013). Additionally, queer linguistics centers the “disruptive potential of transgression, disorder, and struggles for voice” (Leap, 2021, p. 1). The inquiry into the discursive construction gender categories afforded space for early scholarship on trans and gender diverse communities. However, much of this early research was conducted through the lens of cis researchers, sometimes reifying cisnormative assumptions about the lives and experiences of transgender individuals.

Emerging scholarship within a trans linguistic framework (Zimman, 2020) centers the work and analytic lens of trans researchers, attending to the sociocultural peripheries from an insider perspective. While the effort to look at the linguistic margins has been a goal in sociolinguistics for many years, this recent within trans linguistics is primarily led by in-group members and works for “social and linguistic justice for gender non-normative communities” (Zimman, 2020, p. 1) and to “uplift collective movements of transgender joy and
liberation” (Konnelly, 2021b, p. 79). Importantly, research within a translinguistic framework has challenged the gender binary in language and gender research, working to create more trans-inclusive and trans-affirming language practices within the field. This dissertation enters into conversation with this emerging set of sociolinguistic studies that have prioritized trans perspectives as essential to studies of language, gender, and sexuality (Konnelly, 2021; Zimman, 2020) and that work to center the lived realities of trans individuals.

2.2.2 Intersectional Approaches

This dissertation further draws on a framework of intersectionality as it relates to considerations of how multiple, compounding systems of oppression are at work in the lives of individuals. The term “intersectionality” itself is often credited as originating in the work of Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and her analysis of workplace discrimination against Black women. However, a focus on intersectionality has its root within North American Black lesbian-feminist socialism more broadly (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020; Nash, 2018). This lineage is seen in the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) which recognized the ways in which “racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression” were “major systems of oppression [that] are interlocking.” Since Crenshaw’s work, the term and theory has been taken up in a wide array of disciplines, including studies of language, gender, and sexuality. While the uptake of intersectionality has led to heterogeneous definitions, Hill-Collins and Bilge’s (2020) book Intersectionality notes that when using the term, most definitions center on the idea that “people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work
together and influence each other” (2). Crucially, intersectionality centers the ways in which people navigate a *matrix* of structured oppressions, as well as the “relational nature of privilege and oppression” (May, 2015, p. VII).

As intersectionality has been taken up and applied across a wide array of disciplines, there have been critiques of certain implementations of the framework. For instance, miles-hercules (2022) argues that *intersectionality* is often used to refer to “any perspective that acknowledges the coexistence of multiple aspects of subjectivity,” de-emphasizing the focus on *systems* of oppression as present in the writing of Black feminists. Chun and Walters (2021) have suggested that intersectionality is not merely a property of the social structure that has historically shaped experiences, but it is also a cultural construct that can be foregrounded in particular moments to engage in cultural projects; they encourage researchers to be reflexive about what consequences yield when they highlight (or erase) intersectional phenomena in their scholarship. Further critiques of some applications of theories of intersectionality argue that in attending to categories such as race, class, and gender, researchers run the risk of homogenizing or essentializing these categories and the experiences of individual people. In response to this, Yep (2016) argues for “thick *intersectionalities,*” drawing on Geertz’s call for “thick descriptions” within anthropological research and writing. “Thick *intersectionalities*” call for an exploration of “the complex particularities of individuals’ lives and identities associated with their race, class, gender, sexuality, and national locations by understanding their history and personhood in concrete time and space” (Yep, 2010, p. 173). By applying this lens, scholars may better attend to the systems of oppression that emerge within the specific contexts in which they are working.
providing more nuanced analysis of the ways in which race, gender, and other categories manifest within a specific community.

Sociolinguistic scholarship generally has attended to issues of the experiences of speakers at the intersection of various social positionalities and systems of oppression such as race and gender (S. L. Lanehart, 2020; Mendoza-Denton, 2011; Morgan, 1991), race and class (Weldon, 2021), and race and sexuality (Calder & King, 2020; Cornelius, 2016; Cornelius & Barrett, 2020). Within scholarship on language, gender, and sexuality (LGS), there have been various calls towards using an intersectional lens. Several scholars have provided overviews of research that has addressed questions of language, gender, and sexuality in relationship with intersections of race, ethnicity, social class, and other categories (see Chun & Walters, 2021; Gray & Cooke, 2018; Levon, 2015; Zimman, forthcoming for overviews of intersectionality within LGS). These calls for intersectional approaches argue that we should not approach intersectionality superficially, for example, “by simply adding these other categories into the empirical mix, but instead by centering our analyses on the social, historical, ideological, and linguistic relationships between these categories and the different lived articulations of gender and sexuality we study” (Levon 2015, p. 303). As such, the application of intersectionality in queer linguistics must also attend to the social logics and systems of power at play, not simply a diversity of identities (Zimman, forthcoming). Furthermore, in personal reflections on intersectionality within language, gender, and sexuality studies, Bucholtz & miles-hercules (2021), Lane (2021), and Mendoza-Denton (2021) emphasize that linguistic research must also address material implications of intersecting forces.
at play, not only for the participants, but also for scholars, and discuss how this relationship shapes scholarship.

In this dissertation, I address the lives and language of transgender people at the intersections of multiple identity categories, such as Southerness, oldness, youngness, Blackness, whiteness, and Latinxness, as their experiences have been shaped by their privilege or marginalization within multiple intersecting cultural systems that is never explainable via a single social lens. While each chapter looks at one dimension (i.e., regional identity, age, and race) in relation to gender and language, I recognize that these positionalities overlap and impact each other as well. Ultimately, these intersections shape the ways in which my participants relate to issues of trans language: the ideologies about language shared among the participants were never just about language or just about gender, but also about regional identity, age, and race.

2.2.3 Linguistic Activism

The efforts of transgender communities and activists follow a long lineage of marginalized communities that have used language reform as a tool for asserting community recognition. Broadly, such language activist efforts are grounded in an “energetic affirmation of one’s legal or human right to language” (Combs & Penfield, 2012, p. 464) and can be divided into two general strands. The first strand has sought to legitimize marginalized language varieties, for example, through language reclamation and revitalization, especially in indigenous communities in the Americas. Communities have worked to gain official language status, to select the particular variety to be used in revitalization efforts (Dorian, 1994), and to counter mainstream beliefs that devalue these linguistic varieties (Kroskryt, 2010). The efforts of linguists who have
emphasized the rule-based and systematic nature of African American Language (S. Lanehart, 2015) may also be viewed as part of this first strand of language activism (Lewis, 2018). This type of language activism importantly focuses on empowering marginalized communities by showcasing the structural and cultural value of their language varieties and thus countering publicly circulating language stereotypes and ideologies that devalue them.

A second strand of language activism has focused on reform with respect to the hegemonic language variety, specifically proposing prescriptive changes to it. Language activism related to gender, both through feminist movements and trans activism, is closely aligned with this second strand: for example, early calls for English-based gendered language reform in feminist movements focused on making women linguistically ‘visible’ (e.g., the movement from a generic he to gender-specific he and she) (Ehrlich & King, 1992; Mallinson, 2017; Pauwels, 2003). Some of these efforts offered women linguistic recognition, while other parts of these movements challenged their marginalized status by promoting “gender neutral” language (e.g., the use of singular they). Advocates for anti-sexist language reform sought change by encouraging the use of new lexical items by both individuals and institutions (e.g., the gender-inclusive flight attendant rather than the marked feminine form stewardess), offering language guidelines for adoption by media and educational institutions, and raising awareness about how gender hierarchies are encoded in language (Ehrlich & King, 1992, 1994). The effects of these movements, which are often not straightforwardly measurable, have been assessed indirectly, for example, by gauging people’s metalinguistic awareness of sexist language through reports of increasing apologies and self-corrections (Pauwels, 2003). Scholars have suggested that
efforts of linguistic activism have been successful in challenging hegemonic ideas about gendered language insofar as they occurred in tandem with other anti-sexist social or cultural changes (Ehrlich & King, 1994; Pauwels & Winter, 2006). For transgender people, language is often understood as playing a critical role in signaling personal respect and structural recognition. Importantly, the use of specific terms of self-description is a site of self-determination and self-identification, as the individual is seen as the “ultimate authority on their gender identity” (Zimman, 2019, p. 147). Moreover, it is also viewed as critical that others respect and use these terms, reflecting what Zimman (2017a) calls the “dialogic nature of identity” (p. 226). As such, transgender individuals have often invited, if not urged, members of cisgender communities to engage in language practices that appropriately refer to transgender people. Specifically, transgender communities have proposed the mainstream adoption of various linguistic practices, such as normalizing the explicit request for and presentation of pronouns (e.g., What are your pronouns? I use he/him pronouns), using the prefix cis- such that cisgender identity is not treated as unmarked, recognizing labels that challenge a binary and fixed gender bifurcation (e.g., nonbinary), and using gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language (Zimman, 2018a). In addition to the various tactics of linguistic activism utilized by trans communities and to some extent previously recognized by linguists (Zimman, 2017b, 2018a, 2019), various rationalizing discourses have been used to explain why these linguistic practices are legitimate and necessary in mainstream cisgender communities (Crowley, 2022). Although linguists have resisted the assumption that language reform will directly alter social attitudes and dismantle structural oppression (Lewis, 2018; Pauwels, 2003), members of trans communities in the United States have noted
that language reform has helped to change attitudes towards transgender people and to bring awareness to their issues (Zimman, 2017b, p. 85). Language reform by itself cannot directly solve the material struggles of transgender individuals, for example, in terms of their access to employment, housing, and healthcare, but it has been a crucial part of these larger projects of dismantling transphobic oppression, providing transgender individuals with ways to name themselves, inviting recognition of trans identities, and raising reflexive awareness of how cissexism continues to be enacted through language.

2.3 Language Ideologies

Language ideologies that circulate in trans communities in the South are the central focus of my study. In this section, I describe the array of definitions and understandings of language ideologies within the field of linguistic anthropology. Then, I attend to specific conceptualizations of “folk theory” and “folk ideology” that I invoke in the language ideological framework I use to analyze metalinguistic discourses among my participant-collaborators.

2.3.1 Approaches to Language Ideological Research

Understandings of language ideologies are vast and heterogenous (for an overview see Woolard & Schieffelin, 1998), and it is “profitable to think of ‘language ideologies’ as a cluster concept consisting of a number of converging dimensions” (Kroskrity, 2004, p. 7). In this dissertation, I consider language ideologies as culturally shared sets of beliefs about language, language use, or language users (Gal & Irvine, 2019; Kroskrity, 2004; Silverstein, 1979) that motivate, or even sometimes serve as rationalizations for, these usages.

Scholarship on language ideologies has offered several important observations. First, what users of language explicitly claim to be the case about a
language may not necessarily line up with what they produce. That is, while language ideologies often shape practices, they may not always mirror actual linguistic practices, given varying levels of user awareness (Silverstein, 1979; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1998). Second, while some language ideologies are invoked to explicitly rationalize language use or evaluations, many are often naturalized as implicit and commonsense beliefs about language (Rumsey, 1990). Third, beliefs about language within communities are often multiple and competing (Chun, 2017; Kroskrity, 2020; Woolard, 1985, 1992). In fact, an individual might orient to seemingly contradictory ideologies at once, given that prioritizing a specific ideology in a particular moment can further contribute to personal or political projects. A final crucial observation is that language ideologies are not arbitrary cultural formations but rather deeply consequential ones: they shape how language users experience the world and serve the moral and political interests of particular groups (Irvine, 1989).

Two general kinds of language ideologies have been addressed in this literature: 1) ideologies about specific (“little l”) languages (e.g., the correctness, purity, or beauty of specific varieties) and 2) ideologies about (“big L”) Language as a semiotic object (e.g., how words acquire their meanings or what kinds of performative effects language use has). Relevant to the first set are discourses in transgender communities that attempt to produce a linguistic standard, in ways that echo a “standard language ideology,” or beliefs about and rationalizations of a correct hegemonic language (Milroy, 2001; Milroy & Milroy, 1999). Linguists have typically examined standard language ideologies that maintain race and class privilege (Bonfiglio, 2010; Lippi-Green, 1994; Milroy, 2001); however, processes of standardization may also allow marginalized communities to
legitimate themselves (England, 2003), since these strategies lend credence to a way of speaking that has been delegitimized by others (Bucholtz, 2003; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004a). Commonly, both supporters and opponents of language preservation or change may orient to ideologies of purity and correctness (Chun, 2017; Kroskrity, 2009). These processes of standardization inevitably lead to tensions, as the perspectives, practices, and interests of some community members are erased or devalued (Gal, 2016).

Relevant to the second set of language ideologies about language as a semiotic object, this dissertation builds on linguistic anthropological scholarship on semiotic ideologies (Keane, 2018), or systems of belief about how language itself functions and conveys meaning. Within trans communities, referring to oneself via self-identification (Zimman, 2019) presupposes not merely the centrality of the referential function of language but also the authority that individuals have to name and label their own experiences. They thus orient to an ideology of referentialism, which assumes that the primary function of language is to refer to objects in the world and that linguistic value derives from its truth conditionality. This is an ideology that remains dominant in the United States (Hill, 2008; Irvine, 1989; Silverstein, 1979, 2003; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1998). Trans discourses also reproduce a personalist ideology of language that locates meaning within the intentions and beliefs of the language user (Chun, 2016; Hill, 2008), for example, when language is primarily understood as a reflection of a person’s true self (Carr, 2011; Keane, 2018; Zimman, 2017a). Other semiotic ideologies attend to how interpretations of language use are situated within specific contexts, such as a contextualist ideology (Chun, 2017), while others highlight the impact of language use, such as an enactive ideology (Feliciano-
Santos, 2017; Rumsey, 1990), and a performative ideology (Hill, 2008). These semiotic ideologies each have relevance to the kinds of rationalizations that trans individuals offer when discussing their language choices, demonstrating what language users think the purpose of language is — a system that should referentially describe the world, a way to describe the self, or a tool to create action through language.

2.3.2 Folk Ideologies and Theories

Finally, in this section, I address conceptualizations of “(folk) ideology” and “(folk) theory,” how the terms “theory” and “ideology” are often applied in the context of language, and how I take up these terms. The concept of “ideology” itself has been taken up by scholars in various ways: some understandings of ideology have primarily focused on “folk ideologies” that are naïve and unscientific. This understanding of ideology assumes that they reflect a “false consciousness” that could be illuminated or corrected by a scholar or researcher (Kroskrity, 2000). Along this line, ideology has been thought of as a “screen or blockage which intervenes between us and the real world” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 50). Others, however, have taken up ideology more neutrally, in the sense of a “set of beliefs” that people hold that are not necessarily correct or incorrect. Some scholars have focused on the power of ideology within systems of power, drawing attention to how sets of beliefs become normalizes in ways that legitimate hegemonic social powers and having material impacts on individuals (Althusser, 1970). Across these various uptakes of the idea, ideologies are generally assumed to be both naturalizing and universalizing and provide some sort of system of ideas that guide both evaluations and actions.
“Theory” can be generally defined as a system of ideas used to explain something within the world. This understanding of theory would likely include some definitions of language ideology, such as Michael Silverstein’s (1979, 1985, 1992, inter alia), which foregrounds the rationalizing and explanatory power of these belief systems. To some extent, both ideologies (as understood by some scholars) and theory are ways of rationalizing and organizing the world. However, ideologies are generally conceptualized as both implicit and explicit, while theories are explicitly formulated with explanatory power and are not necessarily understood as universal.

Of course, “ideology” is itself a theory. Eagleton (1994) notes that “theories of ideology are, among other things, attempts to explain why it is that [people] come to hold certain views; and to this extent they examine the relation between thought and social reality” (p. 58). Sometimes that relationship is regarded as a reflection of the world and sometimes as a contradiction, but ultimately theories of ideology “assume that there are specific historical reasons why people come to feel, reason, desire and imagine as they do” (p. 65).

Furthermore, one main distinction between “theory” and “ideology” is that “theory” is generally associated with scholars, while “ideology” (in some cases) is applied, with its negative “false consciousness” meaning, to non-scholars or non-experts. Though to some extent, it is understood that academics also have their own ideological frameworks, and non-academics have their own “everyday theories,” there tend to be some distinctions in how these terms are applied. When discussing how non-scholars discuss issues of language, race, and racism, Hill (2008) delineates between “folk theory” and “critical theory.” She draws on cognitive anthropologists’ use of the term “folk theory” to describe the
“everyday understandings of the world” (p. 5). While she notes that scientific and folk theory often influence each other, she argues that the distinction lies in that “folk theorists” are often less reflexive in searching for contrary evidence.

The “false consciousness” understanding of ideology has been important for scholars to intervene and illuminate new ways of thinking, however, I focus on ideology as a set of beliefs that my collaborators are drawing upon to help make sense of their own language use and that of the people they interact with. I want to foreground the everyday theories that my collaborators express and use to understand their own lived experiences. They draw on what we as linguists might call “folk theories” or “folk ideologies,” but they are both as complex and as partial as scholars’ own theories and ideologies of how language works in the world. For some of them, language is a systematic, referential system, for others it is a personal part of their own relationship with their inner self, and for others they recognize that it is a co-constructive tool that they often use strategically to be recognized as a human and to fight for political presence. These perspectives on language reflect various language ideologies, but in many ways, they also mirror the theories of language developed by scholars.

2.4 Language Ideological Research in Transgender Communities

Building off the major bodies of research outlined above, in this dissertation, I combine a trans linguistic framework with language ideological approaches in order to address the negation of what comes to be understood by people within trans communities as “trans language.” While sociolinguistic scholarship has demonstrated how trans people use language in creative ways to subvert gender norms and to construct gendered identities, notably absent are studies that investigate how language ideologies are particularly impactful in the
lives of transgender people. I bring together these two areas of research to
demonstrate how conceptions and uptakes of language ideologies are relevant to
the lives and language practices of transgender people.

In debates about linguistic practices in trans communities, trans
individuals must contend with commonly held ideologies of correctness,
acceptability, and standardization, but they are also operating in relationship to
various ideologies of how they understand language to function and make
meaning in the social world. Often, forms of trans language are seen as
conflicting with standard forms, such as when singular *they* is critiqued as
“ungrammatical,” on the basis of it not being licensed by style guides and
journalistic publications (Conrod, 2018). In linguistic debates within trans
communities, language users must navigate between community-external
pressures to conform to standardized English forms and community-internal
pressures to recognize new forms when standardized English fails to offer
recognition to trans identities. When working to normalize and empower forms
of trans language, community members often draw on legitimizing discourses
that reify standard language ideologies that authorize language via authoritative
sources (i.e., historical facts or dictionary definitions) (Crowley, 2022). Further,
efforts to produce a linguistic “standard” in transgender communities can also
reflect and reproduce particular shared beliefs about “correctness,” such as the
presupposition that a single correct linguistic form exists and that certain
individuals or institutions are epistemically best positioned to authorize the form
as correct (Bucholtz, 2003; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004a). Zimman (2017a) notes that a
“Standard Language Ideology” holds that certain definitions of words related to
gender are seen as more correct, true, official, natural or scientific than others.
Trans linguistic research has explored the complex ways in which trans communities navigate standard versus counter-hegemonic meanings of gendered language through creative uses and reconfigurations of gendered morphology (Bershtling, 2014), body part terminology (Edelman & Zimman, 2014), and identity labels (Hazenberg, 2016).

In addition to navigating standard language ideologies, trans language users are attuned to regional language ideologies. Within the context of South Carolina, trans Southerners must navigate ideologies about Southern American English and politeness norms within the regional linguistic community. For example, they must negotiate pervasive binary gender ideologies, such as those that are presupposed in common Southern terms and titles, including *sir*, *ma’am*, *Mister X*, and *Miss Y*. The use of such address terms might be affirming to some trans people who feel appropriately acknowledged by being called *sir* or *ma’am*; however, their use specifically impacts non-binary trans people who are not recognized within this system (see Chapter 5).

Trans language users must additionally consider the uptake of their language use by the audience, particularly that of the dominant group. Trans individuals, like individuals of many other marginalized communities, are often highly aware of the expectations and evaluations of both their embodiment and language practices by people in positions of power. Linguistic anthropologists have theorized how this awareness of power dynamics impacts language use and have applied concepts such as *ordeals of language* (Basso, 2009; Rodríguez & Webster, 2012), *anticipatory interpolation* (Carr, 2011) and the *listening subject* (Inoue, 2003). Each of these concepts takes into account how the presence of a “powerful other” affects the language practices of marginalized subjects.
An ordeal of language occurs when one’s voice is affected by the presence and observation of a powerful other and as individuals develop a “kind of awareness [that] allows a subordinate subject to imagine what the dominant might think about the public display of [their] voice” (Rodríguez & Webster, 2012, p. 306). Through navigating these ordeals of language, the speakers are made aware of how our “speech is never entirely and exclusively our own, but always heteroglossic and polyvocal, formed always in relation to the speech of others” (Basso, 2009, p. 122) (c.f., Bakhtin, 1981). Furthermore, a speakers’ social positions (e.g., age, experiences of racialization) shape the ways in which their voices are evaluated and judged in public space (Reynolds & Orellana, 2009).

Trans individuals recognize that their use of language, whether identity labels, pronouns, or other forms of trans-inclusive language, is often seen as a challenge to both gender and linguistic norms. Trans voices and language practices are often evaluated from the perspective of a “white, cisgender listening subject that renders the practices of many speakers invalid.” (Calder, 2021, p. 51). Because of this, even private uses of trans language are often figured into broader movements of trans linguistic activism.

Deploying or prioritizing different ideologies can be impactful for social and political movement work done by marginalized communities. Because of this, for many trans South Carolinians, orienting to various ideologies of language at the same time — in fact, moving fluidly between them for strategic purposes — is crucial. This negotiation is not necessarily unique to trans people; for example, within spaces of indigenous language activism, Feliciano-Santos shows “the interactional effects of employing different ideologies of language and meaning, as well as how these ideologies mediate language revitalization”
Across the analysis chapters I will address how during discussions about language within trans communities a wide range of language ideologies emerge — some that challenge and some that uphold mainstream ideologies of language — as well as some that seemingly contradict each other. I will demonstrate how these ideologies shape understandings of what trans language is or should be. In the next chapter, I describe the background to my field site and second address my methods of data collection to contextualize my examination of language practices and ideologies within transgender communities in South Carolina.
CHAPTER 3: BACKGROUND TO THE SITE AND METHODS

3.1 Introduction

Pride celebrations in South Carolina happen in October each year, because June, which is typically designated as Pride Month in the United States, is too hot, even for “Famously Hot SC Pride.” My very first Pride Parade after moving to South Carolina was in October of 2017, just two months after arriving for the start of graduate school. I walked with some new friends along Main Street, a street bisected by the State Capitol Building lined with businesses and restaurants and found a place to sit and watch the parade. During the parade, groups of trans people from the university and local LGBTQ+ Center walked with signs and flags.

As the parade and festival continued through the next day, I spent the entire time continuing to people-watch, excited to see visibly queer and trans folks, young and old, out on the streets, holding hands, wearing colorful Pride flags, buttons, and attire. I thought to myself, “There are so many visibly trans people here! Where are all these people the rest of the year? Where are they hiding when it’s not Pride?” Slowly over the next six years, I would begin to find the enclaves of trans communities living and working across the state. There would be other moments like this — when I felt surrounded by trans people — at local trans peer support group meetings, memorials for Trans Day of Remembrance, protests against anti-trans legislation at the Statehouse, and at Drag King nights at local gay bars. These gatherings commemorated both happy
and sad moments for trans communities in South Carolina, but always reminded me that there were lots of us out there, even when I didn’t always see it.

This chapter will begin with providing the ethnographic background about the region and trans life in South Carolina. Then, I will offer an overview of my methods of data collection and analysis both for the ethnographic and interview data. Subsequently, I will offer a sketch of the individuals who I worked with and talked to throughout my data collection and reflect on how my positionality as a researcher shaped conversations and interviews.

3.2 Background to the Research Site

3.2.1 Trans Life in South Carolina

In media and in scholarship, queer and trans communities are often portrayed both as primarily existing in coastal, urban centers such as New York, San Francisco, or Los Angeles (Abelson, 2019). While these locations have large, visible communities of LGBTQ+ people, and thus are potentially easier to access for research purposes, this has led to an overrepresentation of the experiences of LGBTQ+ in these regions. It might even lead to the assumption that queer and trans communities do not exist in the U.S. South, which is not the case. This dissertation highlights the lives of trans people living in the U.S. South and specifically focuses on the experiences and linguistic practices of transgender people living in South Carolina.

A precise documentation of the number of transgender people in the United States does not exist, given the lack of accurate reporting data about trans individuals, due to lack of representation in major surveys like the U.S. census, as well as possible individual reluctance to disclose trans status. Yet it has been estimated that 1.4 million trans people live in the United States and that 21,000
trans people live in South Carolina (A. R. Flores, Herman, et al., 2016), a state with a population of 5.1 million. This is hardly an insignificant number of trans South Carolinians, which reinforces the idea that scholarship must account for the experiences of trans people outside of the urban centers of the West and Northeast.

Research on queer and trans communities in the U.S. South has worked to de-center metronormativity (Gray, 2009), track histories of queer activism in the South (Pope, 2021), and explore what it means to be both gay and Southern (Mann, 2016). For example, E. Patrick Johnson documented the experiences of Black, Southern, gay men (2011) and lesbians (2018), highlighting the narratives of queer Southerners experiencing the intersecting oppressions of racism and homophobia. Work that has focused on transgender people and communities in the U.S. South in particular has explored the specific issues faced by trans Southerners, such as lack of access to gender-affirming care and social recognition, but also how they develop thriving lives and communities in the Southern United States (Abelson, 2019; Rogers, 2020b). While South Carolina’s trans community in particular has been included in larger studies of trans experiences in the South (A. H. Johnson et al., 2020; Rogers, 2020b), it has yet to be explored on its own terms. Thus, my project builds on this body of research and adds a linguistic perspective on the lives and experiences of transgender people in the U.S. South.

Many people I met and talked to throughout my fieldwork noted that South Carolina can feel like a transient place for queer people. Often the expectation was that, at some point, queer and trans people, and especially queer and trans youth, would move out of the area in favor of larger, more politically
liberal cities. Like many stereotypes, it is based in some grain of truth: some trans Southerners do desire to leave the region and make a new home. Conservative religious ideals, difficulty accessing LGBTQ+ specific resources, minimal job opportunities, and conflict with family are reasons that often motivate “a great migration” to other areas of the United States (A. H. Johnson et al., 2020). A further example of the salience of this stereotype was that my move to South Carolina from California was frequently commented upon as odd or strange, a departure from the expected narrative of queer exodus from the South. However, during my time in South Carolina, I met many other trans people who had moved to the region for various reasons, such as its affordable cost of living, university opportunities, or employment.

When I moved to South Carolina, I connected with a local LGBTQ+ Community Center that served as one of the sites of my research, as well as various campus organizations supporting trans students. Through these contacts, I slowly became connected with other local activists and advocates who worked throughout the state and were connected to queer and trans community groups and organizers in other regions of the state. Local LGBTQ+ organizations are primarily located in mid-sized urban centers across the state’s three main geographic sections, the Midlands, the Low Country, and the Upstate. Further, university and college campus-based organizations exist on many campuses across the state and provide a key place for trans college students to find support and community.²

² While I did not reach out to high school students for this project, an increasing number of South Carolina high schools have Gender and Sexuality Alliances, which are linked through a state-wide GSA network through a large LGBTQ+ advocacy organization.
Both community and university organizations provide a variety of support and programming for trans and nonbinary individuals, from peer support groups to organized panels, guest lectures, clothing swaps, and name-change workshops. Many of these groups also have websites and social media groups for members to connect and be reminded of upcoming events. These groups often also curate online resource lists of local doctors, therapists, and other services that are trans-friendly. Community support groups in South Carolina are crucial for creating social supports, navigating medical and other institutional access (A. H. Johnson, 2017), and creating and sharing knowledge (A. H. Johnson & Rogers, 2020b). In addition to building community resources and support, trans political advocacy organizations in the state work to oppose anti-trans legislation in the South Carolina Statehouse by advocating for protective legislation at legislative hearings, participating in phone banking, and organizing demonstrations at the South Carolina Statehouse. Other community groups focus on mutual aid and community support networks to gather and distribute resources to queer and trans individuals.

Although resources and community organizations have been increasing for trans people in South Carolina over the past decade, many trans individuals remain isolated, given barriers to health resources, overt homophobia and transphobia, and threats to safety in ways that may be palpably different from other regions of the United States (Barton, 2012; Griffin et al., 2019). One of the events that mobilized trans communities was the proposal of the 2016 “Bathroom Bill” (SC H. 3012), a highly contested piece of legislation that mirrored a bill in North Carolina, both of which propelled the precarity of trans people in the Carolinas to a national stage. In response to the bill, trans activists and organizers
from across South Carolina gathered at the statehouse in Columbia, the capital city, for a demonstration and press conference to denounce the legislation (Bolles, 2016; Marchant, 2018). Since the “bathroom bills” in 2016, anti-trans legislation has routinely been proposed in the South Carolina State Legislature\(^3\).

When anti-trans legislation was introduced in the South Carolina Legislature, trans organizations from across the state joined at the statehouse to show solidarity in opposition to the bills (see Figure 3.1 and 3.2 below).

Moments like these protests provided opportunities for trans organizations and community members from across the state to connect in physical solidarity at the state capital. However, statewide connections were felt more by some and less by others. Most people I talked to felt primarily connected to their city, campus, or other local organization. In my conversations with students at various colleges

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3 The 2016 SC Senate Bill 1203 “Bathroom Bill” was followed by the 2019 SC House Bill 4716 “Youth Gender Reassignment Prevention Act,” and two bills in 2021: SC House Bill 3477 / Senate Bill B531 “Save Women’s Sports Act” and SC Senate Bill 811 “SC Minor Child Compassion and Protection Act,” the final two of which will be discussed more in depth in Chapter 7.


5 Photo accessed at https://www.southcarolinaunited.org/field-day. Photo is reproduced with permission of the photographer.
throughout the state, many shared that they were primarily focused on connecting with other trans people at their university and perceived the local organizations as primarily for older community member or younger teens. However, others who had moved cities across the state, or who had participated in state-wide organizing, often felt connected to the larger imagined “South Carolina queer and trans community.”

Finally, in conversations with queer and trans people in South Carolina, there was a general feeling that the state itself was ignored by national LGBTQ+ organizations and that queer people in the state were generally on their own to provide support and resources for one another. One organizer shared with me that they felt that national LGBTQ+ organizations were more likely to put their funding resources into states such as California and New York, where political campaigns were “more winnable.” These attitudes reflect broader stereotypes that the U.S. South is uniquely backwards, behind, and outdated, engaging in forms of discrimination, including those of race and gender, from which the rest of the nation has moved on. While it is crucial to recognize the history of slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow laws that have shaped the U.S. South, narratives pointing solely to this region as a locus of racism in the U.S. functions to absolve the North and the West of systems of oppression that persist in those regions.

3.2.2 Trans South Carolinians Online

Large-scale demonstrations are one place where transgender individuals from across the state can connect, however, the primary way in which these connections are sustained long term is through online platforms. Online spaces have long been important for supporting connections among trans individuals
who live in more rural areas or do not have access to in-person groups (M. L. Gray, 2009).

There are various online locations for connection with other South Carolina trans individuals. One key online space is a private Facebook group that was created in 2016 to keep trans people in South Carolina connected with statewide issues and organizing efforts related to the “bathroom bills,” which politicians have proposed, and sometimes passed, in order to deny trans people access to public restrooms. While this Facebook group is less active than when it was first created, it still has over 900 members and serves as a place for trans groups and individuals across the state to post event information, to ask for support, and to reach out for resources. More recently, the platform Discord, an online application that allows for instant messaging and video calls, has become more popular for connecting trans South Carolinians. A Discord server established by a South Carolina-based trans organization features various “channels,” or chat rooms, for regional organizations across the state to share information about their events, as well as for a wide range of other topics, such as “memes,” “anime,” “housing,” “employment,” and “music.” Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most local groups canceled in-person meetings for a large part of 2020 and moved meetings and events fully online, depending even more heavily on online forms of communication both with local and statewide communities. Before 2019, many of the online public relations social media pages focused on promoting events and in-person activities. However, during times of relative isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Discord servers became more active with people reaching out for advice, recommendations, and support during isolation.
While online spaces such as Facebook groups and Discord servers for transgender South Carolinians foster region-specific connections, many forms of online communication also encourage participation in broader queer and trans activist discourses. Trans communities have been present on platforms such as LiveJournal (Zimman & Hayworth, 2020) and YouTube (Raun, 2016) as well as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, more recently. When discussing their experiences within trans communities, interview participants were as likely to mention online connections as they were in-person ones.

3.3 Data Collection and Methods of Analysis

To attain a relatively holistic understanding of the various reasons, means, meanings, and consequences of the participants’ language practices, I engaged in an ethnographic approach to data collection. During my two years of data collection between June 2020 and August 2022, I engaged in regular participant observation at community events and conducted 20 ethnographic group and individual interviews with 41 community members.

The analysis of the data was ongoing throughout the data collection process. For the audio-recorded interviews, I used methods of interaction analysis, allowing for the identification of locally salient ideologies that participants drew on when rationalizing their linguistic choices. My qualitative analysis of language ideologies provides insight into the types of rationalizations, evaluations, and beliefs that the participants expressed about language and language use. The following section describes these approaches in greater detail, including the types of data that were collected, and the individuals and communities who I was working with.
3.3.1 Participant Observation

After moving to South Carolina in August 2017, I became active in various trans groups in the state, some that met weekly or monthly and others that were maintained primarily in online spaces. These groups provided me with personal social support as a transgender person and allowed me to become connected with other trans people in the region. In addition to regularly attending meetings and events in Palmetto City, I became familiar with the various queer and trans community groups in other regions of the state via connections with local activists and advocates. As I began developing my research project in 2019, I shared my ideas and plans with members of these groups, many of whom had witnessed my trajectory in graduate school and who were excited for my research. Additionally, one of the board members of the community-based LGBT resource center wrote a letter of support for the NSF\(^6\) grant application for this project.

Given that the number of transgender people involved in networks of trans communities in South Carolina is relatively small, I often had many overlapping relationships with people in these groups; the network was both dense and multiplex. While the majority of group members were people I had met and interacted with primarily at community events and meetings, members of these groups also included close friends and former romantic interests as well as people from the university, including fellow graduate students and even my own undergraduate students. I did my best to attend to these complicated and overlapping identities as I began my research project and data collection in 2020.

\(^{6}\) This project was supported by an NSF Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement (DDRI) Grant #2116356.
Further, as someone who may be understood as undertaking “native ethnography” (Narayan, 1993), I was also aware of the ways in which my trans status allowed me entry into these shared spaces, but did not “absolve me from the need to negotiate legitimacy and trust with people both familiar and unfamiliar to me” (Jacobs-Huey, 2006, p. 10).

When attending local events, I did not take audio recordings of the interactions, as I wished to protect the privacy of the group. Typically, after an event, I would write fieldnotes that described my perceptions of participants’ experiences and local meanings. I aimed to describe moments, language practices, and social categories that community members understood as meaningful, such as noting terminology that group participants used to describe their own identities or moments of tension regarding newer identity labels taken up by younger group participants. Attending these social and community-based events outside of the interview context allowed me to have a better understanding of what kinds of language ideologies circulated within transgender communities and how they related to strategies of language standardization. These notes were used to supplement the analyses of interview data; they also served as a record of language practices beyond the interview context, offering ethnographic sociolinguistic description and contextualization. My data analysis focuses primarily on the recorded interviews which I conducted between 2020 and 2022, but my understanding of the social context in which these interviews were situated is inextricably tied to my own participation in transgender communities during the six years that I have lived in South Carolina.
3.3.2 Ethnographic Interviews

The use of interviews has been an important means of data collection for researchers in both sociolinguistics and trans linguistics, as a means of eliciting a range of language styles (Labov, 1972) and ideologies of social identity (Zimman, 2016), respectively. Through conducting interviews with both trans individuals and groups of individuals from across South Carolina, I aimed to obtain several subsets of information: (1) participants’ background and experiences within trans communities; (2) participants’ explicit articulations of evaluative stances (Du Bois, 2007; Jaffe, 2009) toward categories of gender identity; and (3) beliefs about their own and others’ language practices, including those that motivate their own and others’ language choices.

I began recruitment for my data collection in summer of 2020, after most in-person community events had moved online due to the COVID-19. During this period, almost all of my contact with other trans people occurred online. Thus, I began to reach out on social media to trans communities in South Carolina to ask whether people were interested in participating in online Zoom interviews. Recruitment occurred through a snowball sampling method; I circulated a virtual flyer (Appendix A) and sign-up form (Appendix B) on various Facebook pages, Discord servers, and email listservs, and encouraged people to share it with their friends and community members.

The only requirement that I had for interview participants was that they identified as trans or as part of “the trans community.” I left this requirement intentionally broad, as I wanted to be as inclusive of nonbinary people who might not identify as trans themselves but who might see themselves as part of a trans community. In the recruitment post, I encouraged people to sign up to
participate in a group interview with their friends in an attempt to facilitate casual, open conversations. However, the composition of group interviews primarily depended on each participants’ schedule and availability. Because of this, some interviews consisted of groups of strangers from across the state who had not met before, some consisted of groups of acquaintances who had met at various community events, and some consisted of a group of close friends who had chosen to talk with me together. I also had varying levels of familiarity with my participant-collaborators; some of them I knew well from my own local involvement with trans groups while others I had only connected with online and was “meeting” for the first time during the interview.

Between one and four participants participated in each interview. While I focused on arranging group interviews, due to various scheduling issues and last-minute cancellations, four out of the 20 interviews were conducted one-on-one. In my previous experience, group interviews have been particularly productive spaces for the overt discussion of language and gender ideologies among trans participants, although I recognize that interviews are a particular speech event that encourages specific kind of conversation that may not mirror discourse in other events (Briggs, 1984). Like all research methods, the “focus-group” style interviews provides many strengths but does come with its limitations. One strength of this interview format is that it allows participants to respond to and build off one another in a conversation, rather than to interact only in a question-answer format with the interviewer. However, there is also the possibility that in these group settings, participants are not as honest, especially if they feel their ideas might be opposing to another participant (Hornsby, 2022).
All of the interviews were semi-structured; I prepared a list of questions (Appendix C) about language practices in the trans community, but I encouraged participants to discuss freely and respond to one another. The discussion generally varied based on the participants’ familiarity with each other as well as their familiarity with the online platform. The broad interview schedule included open-ended questions, generally addressing the following issues:

1. **Participant background information:** Participants’ pronouns and gender identities, coming out experiences, experiences in trans communities online and in-person, life as a trans person in South Carolina and online.

2. **Gender and other social categories:** Personal identity labels, labels for local social groups, reasons that participants belong or do not belong, attitudes towards social categories of identity and towards social hierarchies in mainstream institutions.

3. **Metalinguistic commentary:** Commentary about language use within trans communities, examples of specific terminology, opinions about changing language practices, experiences with community language debates.

The full list of possible interview questions that I prepared can be found in Appendix C. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, I did not ask every group the same set of questions, rather, I used the set of questions as a jumping off point and let the participants shape the trajectory of the interviews. Like in any interview scenario, there was likely some pressure for participants to try to say what they thought I, the interviewer, would want to hear. To mitigate this to the extent that I could, I encouraged participants to treat this as a conversation with each other and to bounce ideas off one another.
Some of the questions dealt specifically with issues of language. Eliciting metalinguistic commentary that occurs during “conscious native-speaker explanations of appropriate language behavior” (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1998, p. 58) has long been an important source of insight for linguists and anthropologists. Because linguistic practices have important implications for trans people who must constantly navigate their social identities in the context of labels imposed by others, there is abundant metalinguistic discussion within transgender communities, reflecting a high level of metalinguistic awareness; as Zimman (2018b) notes, “trans people are natural linguists” (n.p.). However, it is important to recognize that explicit metalinguistic articulations are not always direct reflections of what people believe or what they actually do in practice. Thus, it is crucial to pair these interviews with the ethnographic observations of language use in everyday community activities.

The interviews generally were between 60 and 90 minutes, for a total of about 25 hours of interview recordings. Each participant was compensated 20 dollars for each interview hour that they participated in. This rate is slightly above the median hourly wage in South Carolina, which was 17.91 U.S. dollars in 2021 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). I allowed participants to sign up for multiple interviews, in which they were often paired with new group members; however, only two out of the 20 interviews included people who had participated in multiple interviews. For the interviews with returning interviewees, I prepared follow-up questions but allowed the interview to be primarily directed by the participants themselves, based on topics and ideas that they had been thinking about since our first conversation.
As a result of the strong relationships that I have fostered with local trans community members, I was likely able to facilitate interviews and conversations with greater ease than an outsider might, especially given the difficulty for transgender people to openly discuss issues of gender in the face of marginalization and rejection. At the end of this chapter, I reflect in greater detail on how my positionality in relation to my participant-collaborators shaped my research.

3.4 Methods of Discourse Analysis

3.4.1 Analysis of Interview Data

Analysis of interview data involved four stages. First, all recordings were roughly transcribed using an automatic text transcription software. Following this, I edited and corrected the transcriptions for accuracy and detail. Then, using the qualitative analysis software, NVivo, recorded segments of theoretical interest were identified. I roughly coded the transcripts for themes and topics of interest, such as explicit metalinguistic commentary, discussion about the South, and other identities. Further, I coded for the following features:

1) lexical items and pronouns that are used to talk about transgender identities (e.g., trans, transgender, transsexual, nonbinary, genderqueer),

2) linguistic constructions that are used to evaluate or take stances toward specific labels (e.g., X is correct, I use Y, it sounds weird to say Z),

3) rationalizations for choosing labels (e.g., it’s grammatically correct, it’s in the dictionary, it just fits); and

4) interactional strategies of negotiating terminology and metalinguistic commentary (e.g., ‘calling out’ others’ use
of “problematic” terms, commenting on generational differences in terminology).

Coding for these linguistic dimensions allowed me to systematically identify which ideological presuppositions were prioritized when justifying their linguistic practices as well as how such presuppositions were interactionally negotiated.

Following coding, excerpts that exemplified relevant metalinguistic discussion were transcribed in detail. Transcription conventions loosely follow those used by scholars of interaction analysis (e.g., Goodwin 1981) with attention to the ways in which transcription choices presuppose researcher assumptions (Ochs, 1979) and have political implications and consequences (Bucholtz, 2000). I have included the following conventions in Table 3.1 adapted from Goodwin (1990):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcription Convention</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bold underline</td>
<td>Focus of analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>italics</td>
<td>Emphasis (pitch, amplitude)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAPITALS</td>
<td>Increased volume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:</td>
<td>Lengthening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Sudden cut-off/restart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.</td>
<td>Falling pitch contour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>Rising pitch contour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h</td>
<td>Laughter, breathiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(,)</td>
<td>Short pause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>~ ~</td>
<td>Fast speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((details))</td>
<td>Additional transcription details</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, transcripts were examined for evaluative stances toward language forms (e.g., commentary on lexical or grammatical forms), as well as stances toward gender categories, as evidence of local ideologies of language and gender. I focused my analysis on moments in conversation in which the participants, often in response to my questions, discussed their linguistic choices, and provided
rationalizations for these choices, sometimes making explicit their language ideologies.

3.5 Categories and Labels

3.5.1 The Transgender Community and Transgender Communities

“The transgender community” or “the trans community,” as it is called in common parlance such as in media representations and everyday discourse, might seem to refer to a monolithic group. However, my participants used the definite, singular label as a reference to both an imagined set of all people who are transgender as well as to constellations of local community groups, online networks, friendships, and other interpersonal relationships. In this section, I draw on various theoretical frameworks of “community” emerging from sociolinguistics and other social science disciplines in order to describe what “the trans community” is.

Early research within variationist sociolinguistics focused on patterns across macro-social categories, like age, race, and gender. In his research on linguistic variation in New York City, Labov defined a *speech community* as constituted by “participation in a set of shared norms” (W. Labov, 1972, p. 120). Gumperz’s (1968) foundational research also focused on the speech community as an aggregate of humans with shared linguistic forms as well as shared norms on how language should be used. These frameworks allowed for a recognition of shared norms as essential to a community, but they often presented communities as static entities, rather than being attuned to their heterogeneity. Thus, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet’s (1992) adoption of the framework of *community of practice* from education scholars was an essential move within sociolinguistics, as it focused on members who shared a mutual orientation rather than a set of
language practices. Importantly, this move allowed for a grounded approach to local meaning making, as it emphasized mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999).

My collaborators were not part of a single community of practice, but rather what might be understood as several overlapping communities of practice: members of local trans groups that regularly met, participants in activist organizations, members of online communities that had some overlapping membership, and attendees of state-wide trans events. Many of my participants felt connected to local networks of transgender people through local and online communities of practice. However, while the community of practice model might suggest a shared orientation towards language use, this dissertation attends at length to the debates and conflicts about language that emerge between people who might be understood as part of the same community of practice.

The interview participants also understood themselves in relationship to the institutionalized representations of transgender identity and a broader “transgender community,” which is helpfully understood through the concept on an “imagined community,” proposed by historian Benedict Anderson’s (1983) scholarship on nationalism. Anderson used the term to explore how the idea of a nation-state becomes coherent through shared icons and symbols, and how people across a nation understand themselves to be part of a community of people that they have never met. People within a nation share an idea of belonging to a collective “in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p.15). But Anderson, and many other scholars, have recognized that this can apply to various other types of human communities, such as
transgender communities, who often express a feeling of shared experience with other transgender people that they have never been in contact, and even have a shared flag which represents trans individuals and communities.

For some trans people, perceiving oneself as part of a national or international imagined “transgender community” is useful for creating social connection, combating feelings of isolation, and relating to others (known or unknown) who experience the same struggles. The terminology used to refer to transgender people has undergone significant shift, but “transgender” is often understood as an “umbrella term” that encompasses a wide range of identities. In some contexts, the phrase “the transgender community” is used to encompass all people who are transgender or who have a gender identity that is seen as being encompassed by “the transgender umbrella.” In the sense of this larger, imagined community, some trans people understand themselves as members of “the trans community,” even if they had few interactions with other transgender people, either online or in person.

While a broad understanding of trans community can be useful for mobilizing large coalitions for people under a shared identity or community label, when used in mainstream discourse, the phrase “the transgender community,” in its singular and definite form, often paints a monolithic picture of trans experiences, desires, advocacy, and activism. These representations can play into transnormative expectations of transgender experience; what gets understood as “the trans community” is situated within white, upper middle-class narratives of transgender experience (Kolysh, 2016). One of my participants, Makia, a Black trans woman, jokingly, but pointedly, referred to this white,
normative representation of trans communities as “the transgender community, star, umbrella, TM sign, all of it:”

Example 3.1: “star, umbrella, TM sign”
Makia (she/her)- Interview 19
1 I feel like the transgender community star umbrella um TM sign
2 all of it
3 I feel like it’s very (. ) um oppositional to Black trans subjectivity?
4 Black trans feminine subjectivity specifically?

This comment is multilayered: she first uses an emphatic the to indicate that “the [ði] trans community” has become imagined as monolithic. Second, she names the “star” and “umbrella” to denote understandings of “transgender” as encompassing of a wide array of gender experiences. In particular, “star” references primarily in-group debates from the early 2010s about writing “trans*” with an asterisk/star, which drew on search engine functionality to “open up transgender or trans to a greater range of meanings” (Garrison, 2018). Finally, her reference to the “TM sign,” or trademark, further emphasizes that this specific understanding of trans community has been legitimizd through mainstream representation. She is additionally distancing herself from this cultural concept of “the transgender community,” specifically as she expresses that it is “oppositional to Black trans subjectivity” (line 2). Even though this understanding of “a transgender community” is one of an imagined community, for many trans people like Makia, “a transgender community’ has come to have a certain institutionalized and experiential reality” (Valentine, 2007, p. 101).

To understand what is meant by references to “the transgender community,” it is crucial to draw on both the concept of communities of practice and that of imagined communities because trans people often understand themselves as part of both local, on-the-ground communities of practice as well
as part of a larger imagined community of people who have a shared identity category. However, in order to recognize that transgender communities are multiple and heterogenous and that the participants might understand themselves as part of more than one trans community, in this dissertation, I refer to my participants as members of “transgender communities.” In fact, as I demonstrate in the following chapters, perspectives on trans language were hardly homogenous, as they reflected participants’ lived experiences shaped by region, race, and age, as well as disparate gender identities.

3.5.2 The Scope of Social Categories

Just as defining “the trans community” is a complicated task, using broader category labels of “LGBTQ+,” “queer,” and “queer and trans” each come with their own challenges. The adjective “queer” has been used increasingly, but not uncontroversially, in both academic and community-based spaces as a synonym for the adjectival initialism “LGBTQ+”. The adjectival collocation “queer and trans” has also become increasingly common within community discourses as a way to recognize that these categories are not necessarily overlapping (i.e., that some trans people might not identify themselves as queer). Thus, groups of “queer and trans” people might include people who identify themselves as both queer and trans, as well as people who are either queer or trans and not the other. While this dissertation primarily deals with the experiences of transgender people, throughout I will sometimes use “queer and trans” communities to recognize the overlapping experiences, shared spaces, and activism and advocacy of queer people and trans people.

As the participants grapple with the ways in which forms of language move between communities, they organize and delineate communities in various
ways. For example, as will be explored in Chapter 6, participants moved between references to “ballroom culture,” “Black trans community,” “Black queer community,” “Black gay community,” “trans community,” “queer community,” “gay community,” and “mainstream culture,” among others. In some cases, these categories each represented slightly expanding domains (e.g., “gay community” refers to gay people of all racial backgrounds while “Black gay community” delineates a specific group within that set). However, in other instances, a racially unspecified category (e.g., “queer community”) was not treated as a superset of a racially specified one (e.g., “Black queer community”), but in fact its unmarked counterpart (i.e., “white queer community”), suggesting the normative status of whiteness. In the interviews, participants used a wide array of shifting labels, so I do my best to attend to these erasures and slippages within the context of each interview.

Throughout the interviews, participants made references to “mainstream” spaces and language. There were slippages and overlaps with how this term was taken up and understood, and who was included and excluded in this descriptor depended on the speaker’s positionality or the particular topic of discussion. For example, in some instances, “mainstream” was used to refer to communities of cisgender and heterosexual people who were seen as “conventional” or “normal,” relative to whom queer people were marginalized. However, when collocated with LGBTQ+ (e.g., “mainstream LGBTQ+ communities”), the term typically was used to describe white, cisgender gay (and sometimes lesbian) communities, to which radical Black and trans communities did not belong. At the same time, “mainstream LGBTQ+” could also be used to characterize those who assimilated (or desired to assimilate) to “mainstream” cis and heterosexual
American life. The term “mainstream” was additionally used in the sense of “mainstream media,” which typically emerged when participants talked about how trans experiences were represented in movies, television, and the news. However, in one case, a participant referenced forms of African American English making their way into the mainstream, as they are “used to death on Twitter” (Chapter Six Example 6.1), indicating that, at least to this participant, social media platforms such as Twitter constituted the mainstream. In these cases, I also do my best to attend to and describe the context of usage.

3.5.3 Describing the South

Another relevant category is that of “the South.” When defining the South, drawing distinct geographic boundaries can be highly contested (e.g., popular discourses that claim Texas is or is not in the South, or the exclusion of Florida despite being geographically “in the South of the United States”). Researchers operationalize historical, cultural, and geographic factors in order to delineate what is understood as the South. South Carolina is encompassed by many of these metrics: it is geographically south of the Mason-Dixon Line, the 36°30’ parallel; it was the first state to secede from the Union during the Civil War; it historically relied on plantation crops dependent on the labor of enslaved Black people; and South Carolinians pride themselves on their sweet tea and barbecue, two emblematic “Southern” victuals. For the purposes of this project, it was not necessary to create an objective or consistent metric for what is understood as the South; rather, the analyses attend to how my participants understand themselves as living in the South.
3.6 Participants and Researcher Positionality

When recruiting participants, the only criteria for inclusion were that participants live currently, or had lived for significant periods of time, in South Carolina and that they either identified as transgender or with an identity under the transgender umbrella. This umbrella included trans women and men, as well as nonbinary, genderqueer, or genderfluid individuals. Before the interview, participants were sent a survey with open-ended questions to collect demographic information. Table 3.2 shows some of this demographic information, the content of which I elaborate on in the sections that follow. Participants were encouraged to pick their own pseudonyms, to respect the importance of self-naming practices within trans communities. If a participant used more than one set of pronouns, I alternate between the sets when writing about the participant.

Table 3.2 Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Int#</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>nonbinary, trans, genderqueer</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Latino/Brasilian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>trans guy</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>3,7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Names were chosen by participants. Most chose to use a pseudonym, but some chose to use a nickname or their real name.

“Int#” is an abbreviation for “Interview Number”

Spelling conventions of the participants have been maintained here.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender/Identity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>T</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Oliver</td>
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<td>Lee</td>
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</tr>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Alien</td>
<td>he/him, trans man</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Asher</td>
<td>ze/zim, just myself</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>sparkle</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>fern</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Cali</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>J</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>she/her, trans woman</td>
<td>25</td>
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</tr>
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<td>25</td>
<td>Bueller</td>
<td>he/him, male</td>
<td>28</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Finn</td>
<td>they/them, non-binary</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>BJ</td>
<td>he/him, trans man</td>
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<td>J5</td>
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<td>69</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Mercury</td>
<td>he/they, 😘😘</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Irvin</td>
<td>they/them, genderqueer</td>
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<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Pickles</td>
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<td>32</td>
<td>Parker</td>
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<td>Asian American</td>
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<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Ryoung</td>
<td>she/her, female</td>
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<tr>
<td>34</td>
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<td>white</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Jaime</td>
<td>he/him, trans man</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>---</td>
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<td>--------</td>
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<tr>
<td>36</td>
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<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Demetria</td>
<td>they/she</td>
<td>Nonbinary, femme</td>
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<td>40</td>
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<td>she/her</td>
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<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Kamau</td>
<td>they/he</td>
<td>Transmasculine</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My participant-collaborators understood me as a member of a trans community, and throughout the research process, I was undoubtably given access to certain spaces and conversations due to my “insider status.” I was welcomed into trans groups in which non-trans participants are not, interview participants assumed that I had background knowledge on trans-specific terminology, and conversations about in-group tension within trans communities were openly talked about. However, as this dissertation will explore in depth, there are many axes of identity in relation to which language was contextually situated, including axes pertaining to how I was similar to and different from many of my participant-collaborators. In this section, I provide an overview of the demographic characteristics of my participants and reflect on how my own positionality as a researcher shaped the data and analysis that appear in this dissertation.

3.5.1 Regional Identity

As I have already noted, the only location-based criteria when recruiting participants was that participants currently lived in South Carolina or had lived there for a significant period of their lives. The shortest time a person had been living in South Carolina was just under one year, and the longest 49 years, and
37% of the participants (n=15) had lived in South Carolina for their entire lives, 24% (n=10) had lived in South Carolina for more than half their lives, 12% (n=5) between a quarter and half their life, and 27% (n=11) had lived in the state for less than a quarter of their life, often having moved to South Carolina for an undergraduate program or a job in adulthood. Thirty-nine of the participants were currently living in South Carolina, and only two were not living in South Carolina; these two had both grown up in the state and had moved away for college. The average number of years spent in the state was 19 years.

While all participants met the criteria of living in South Carolina or having lived in the state for a significant period of their lives, some participants self-identified as Southerners and others did not. One participant, Pickles, a nonbinary person who had lived in South Carolina their entire life, strongly identified as a Southerner. Other participants who had moved between states in the South also claimed the label. For example, fern, who identified as both Southern and Appalachian, had grown up in Tennessee and moved to South Carolina for their undergraduate and graduate degrees, and remained in South Carolina afterwards. Some participants who had not grown up in South Carolina, but had lived there for most of their adulthood, talked about themselves as transplants to the South. At the other end of the spectrum, one participant, Oliver, had moved to South Carolina only within the past year, and described themself as a Midwesterner.

Like some of the participants, I did not grow up in the South. At the start of data collection in June of 2020, I had been living and studying in South Carolina for almost three years, and at the time of writing I had been living in the state for six years. I was born and raised in Southern California, and thus had
begun to be exposed to the norms of Southern politeness and respect (which will be discussed in detail in chapter 4) only when I lived in Atlanta, Georgia after graduating from college and then in South Carolina during graduate school. In the conversations with my participants, I was able to commiserate about our shared experiences of being gendered in day-to-day interactions in the region, but participants often recognized me as an outsider when explaining their experiences of being taught about appropriate Southern behavior from parents, teachers, and older relatives. A possible advantage to this insider-outsider status was that participants knew that I could relate to the daily experiences of living in the region, having lived and worked in the area, but they also were often explicit in their descriptions of growing up in the state, as they recognized that I did not share that childhood experience. In order to attend to my outsider status, the analysis in Chapter 4 reflects responses I received from both cis and trans Southerners via conference presentations as well as feedback from a community-collaborator, a trans woman from South Carolina.

3.5.2 Gender

In the pre-interview survey (Appendix B), eight participants labeled their gender as “trans woman/trans feminine,” 17 as “trans man/trans masculine,” and 16 as “nonbinary/genderqueer/genderfluid,” while three used descriptions such as “just myself,” an emoji representation of their gender, or simply “transgender.”10 Though these numbers are useful in providing a general sketch of the participants, their decontextualized incompleteness became clear in the interviews. In the survey, each participant described their gender through

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10 These numbers do not add up to 41 as there are participants who identified their gender as belonging to more than one of these categories.
generally one or two terms, while throughout the interviews, many of them identified their gender by using a wide variety of other terms and provided nuanced explanations for when and where they would use specific terms. Further, participants often understood themselves to be in one or more of these categories (e.g., as both nonbinary and transmasculine).

My own gender experience as a nonbinary, transmasculine person undoubtably shaped the conversations and experiences that I had throughout my fieldwork. Within some trans-specific spaces that I went to in Palmetto City, I experienced some implicit and explicit marginalization, if not pushback, as a nonbinary person, such as when group leaders would refer to “our trans brothers and sisters,” or when another group participant told me that I would eventually “pick a side” (i.e., realize I was cis woman or a trans man). When I first started attending a local transgender support group in 2018, there were “breakout groups” for trans men and trans women, but not nonbinary people, a practice that has since changed. At the time, I chose to sit in on the group for trans men, due to some shared experiences with them (i.e., desire to pursue aspects of medical transition, such as taking testosterone). Eventually, the group leaders generally shifted to promoting the group as being for “transmasculine people.”

When talking to trans people who did not identify as nonbinary, I encountered some discussion of nonbinary-exclusionary language or ideas that nonbinary people were not “trans enough” (Garrison, 2018). Throughout these interactions, I was aware that not all trans people who I talked to might understand me as trans, especially prior to my own process of medical transition. On the other hand, my positionality as an openly nonbinary person opened the
possibility for a more nuanced conversation with other nonbinary people, given experience and understanding of navigating normative narratives of transgender experience. However, while I am nonbinary, I am also a transmasculine person, and I do not experience transmisogyny and the specific experiences of discrimination and violence that involve both transphobia and sexism that transwomen and transfeminine people experience. Trans women were a minority among my participants, and it is possible that what they shared with the trans men and nonbinary people present was different from what they would have shared with other trans women.

3.5.3 Age

Though the participants represent a wide array of gender identities, experiences, and presentations, the majority of the participants were in their early to mid-twenties. Participants ranged from 19 to 69 years old, with an average age of 29.7 and a median age of 25. Twenty-six out of the 41 participants were in their twenties at the time of the interviews, as I was able to easily recruit participants via youth-centered spaces, such as university LGBTQ+ student organizations and social media platforms. Further, I was conducting interviews via an online video conferencing platform, which younger participants were likely more familiar with.

Like the majority of my participants, I was also in my mid-twenties at the time of data collection. As noted above, my methods of online recruitment and interviewing likely shaped the demographics of people who participated, skewing towards younger participants. While the concept of age within trans communities is complicated (further considerations about intergenerational relationships and the distinction between “chronological age” and “trans age”
will be explored in Chapter 5), having a similar chronological age to many participants facilitated conversations through shared cultural knowledge of contemporary trans representation. Further, I often had an affinity with participants who were current college students, as I had completed my undergraduate education within the past five years, and I was working and studying on a college campus.

When older trans adults participated in interviews, they often took on the role of “elder” by describing their experiences coming out in different time periods, especially when there were other younger participants present. In many cases, older trans adults oriented to me as a young trans person, grouping me with other younger participants. In some cases, however, interviewees who were chronologically older than me had been “out” as trans for a shorter length of time than I had, which in some cases meant they oriented to me as someone who had more expertise in the community, despite being chronologically younger.

Related to status and expertise, my position as a doctoral student, researcher, and linguist inevitably shaped the power dynamic of the conversation. This became evident in some interviews when the topic of language was being discussed, and a participant who knew my background would explicitly note that I perhaps knew more about the topic than they did (such as forms of inclusive language in languages other than English). While this dynamic was impossible to avoid altogether, I attempted to redirect this by turning the conversation back to their ideas and reflections, rather than sharing my linguistic expertise. I understood such moments not as an “observer’s paradox” to be confronted but as an opportunity to observe how linguistic expertise was locally constructed.
3.5.4 Class Background

Many of the participants identified themselves as working-class, which mirrors the fact that trans people have lower income than cis counterparts (Movement Advancement Project, 2015). Due to this, it is possible that some participants participated in the interview because they needed the money. Thus, I endeavored to fairly compensate the participants for their time and expertise without putting undue pressure on participants.

Additionally, class dynamics shaped some participants’ orientations to discussions of trans language. In some cases, discussions about terminology and language were seen as primarily happening within academic spaces, which were often equated with upper-class communities. These ideologies were often present in conversations that I witnessed about relationships between university-based trans organizations and community-based trans organizations in South Carolina, where community-based trans groups were perceived as having more working-class people, whereas university-based trans groups had participants from more privileged class backgrounds. While these generalizations elide the experiences of working-class college students, they demonstrate some ties between eliteness, class, and discussions about trans language. Further intersections of class and rurality meant that some participants had less time and/or geographic access to trans spaces where some of these discussions were happening. Some participants pointed to online spaces as a way that allowed broader access to conversations about trans community and identity. However, others mentioned the barrier of time, noting that some trans people had to prioritize financial survival over being active in either in-person or online trans spaces.
3.5.5 Race

More than half of the participants identified their race in the open-ended pre-interview survey as white/Caucasian (27). Participants also identified their race as Black/African American (8), Hispanic/Latinx (3), Asian American (1), and bi/multi-racial (2). While interviews often included participants of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, white participants were the most consistently represented in addition to me, a white trans researcher. This racial configuration may have allowed whiteness to be treated as the norm, as it often is in representations of trans identity; “trans spaces” are frequently organized by and oriented to the experiences and needs of white transgender people. For example, in-person trans groups in Palmetto City, South Carolina were often also predominantly white. Because I was primarily recruiting through these local organizations and networks, more than half of the participants in the interviews were also white trans people. Further, my positionality as a white researcher likely shaped the type of discussion that emerged and what participants of color felt comfortable sharing or explaining to someone who was not a member of their racial group. When participants of color took part in the same interview (Interviews 6, 8, 17), they were more likely to talk about their experiences as racialized trans people as opposed to when they were the only non-white person in the group interview (Interviews 1, 3, 5, 7, 13, 15, 17). Further, in one-on-one interviews with participants of color (Interviews 18, 19, 20), they appeared to share their experiences of racism openly and to critique white trans norms, possibly because they did not need to navigate racial and racializing perspectives. Chapter 6 will attend to issues of race within trans communities more specifically, but throughout the dissertation, I note the ways in which my
data reflects norms of whiteness within trans communities, especially as that is relevant to the U.S. South.

One of the benefits of conducting group interviews was that it allowed participants who shared identities to bounce ideas off and to reaffirm their experiences with one another. For example, in Interview 17, there were an multiple Black participants and multiple older trans adults (Interview 17). In this interview, there was more explicit reflection on issues within Black trans communities and the older trans adults were able to share their experiences more specifically than they did with all younger participants. In interviews where there were participants with different backgrounds and experiences, there were some instances of tension regarding intra-community debates, such as one interview with two older trans women and two younger trans men, during which there was a tense discussion about the idea of trans identity as a trend among younger people.

Another factor that influenced the conversations was participants’ familiarity with one another. When recruiting participants, I encouraged people to sign up for an interview with their friends, in order to elicit more casual in-group conversations. However, this was not always possible, and many of the interviews included people who had little to no familiarly with others present. As the facilitator of the interviews, I did my best to encourage discussion and to make sure that the participants were able to have their thoughts and opinions heard in the space. Despite my efforts to attend to the experiences of trans identity across many participants, it is inevitable that some experiences are less represented than others in this dissertation. As an “outsider/within” (Collins, 1986) in my role as researcher within these communities and interviews, I am
grateful for my participants for sharing their time, expertise, and wisdom with me, and for trusting me with their stories.
CHAPTER 4: NAVIGATING THE GENDERING POLITENESS PRACTICES OF THE SOUTH

4.1 Introduction

It’s a Tuesday evening, and I’m waiting in the checkout line at the local supermarket with my week’s groceries piled in my cart. I wait as the cashier rings up the person in front of me. “Do you need any help out to your car, sir?” the employee asks, as they are trained to do as part of the company’s hospitable, Southern brand. I load my items onto the counter and prepare myself for the interaction: Will I be sir or ma’am today? My short hair sometimes gets me read as a “sir” from a quick glance, but my voice still sometimes puts me into the “ma’am” category. The cashier looks up at me as they scan my items. “How’re you doing today, darlin’?” Casual gendering avoided! Pleased, I reply “I’m doing well, thank you very much.” As I grab my bags, I hear the cashier welcome the person behind me: “Hello ma’am, how are you today?” Walking away, I laugh to myself and text a group chat of trans friends, “the three Southern Genders: sir, ma’am, and darlin’!”

This kind of casual gendering exemplified in the anecdote above pervades daily life in the South. When I moved to South Carolina from Southern California, where I had grown up, I was unaccustomed to the practice and found it jarring, especially since I was frequently misgendered during public interactions. I was called Miss and ma’am during most service encounters. The
first time I was called *sir*, I felt a mix of emotions: I felt both excited about not being read as a woman and worried about what would happen if they found out that I was not, in fact, a cisgender man. I never quite knew how I would be read or gendered in different situations. While using the words *sir* and *ma’am* seemed insignificant, their prevalence was a constant reminder that I, and other trans people, were always being perceived through the lens of the gender binary.

Throughout my time spent in trans communities in South Carolina, trans people frequently discussed their experiences of navigating the gendering linguistic practices of the South. At community support groups, participants often reveled in the joys of being gendered appropriately at the pharmacy or vented about the frustration of being misgendered by a server at a restaurant. The need to navigate being misgendered by strangers is felt by trans people regardless of their geographical residence, but trans Southerners I interviewed felt this to be a specifically salient part of trans life in South, likely because address terms are often part of Southern cultural norms of politeness, friendliness, and respect. Speakers of Southern American English are stereotypically associated with terms such as *sir, ma’am, Miss./Mrs./Mr., y’all, folks, darling, sugar, honey*, among others, some that encode gender and others that do not. However, participants in the interviews primarily focused on the use of *sir* and *ma’am*, perhaps in part because these address terms are common in service encounters and in part because they often understood to be habitual, ingrained parts of Southern American English users’ speech. In fact, many trans Southerners themselves have been raised with these types of gendering linguistic practices and understand the cultural norms and values that these address terms index.
Within mainstream discourses, Southern culture, language, and values are often portrayed as conservative and “backward,” generally characterizing the region as a place where conservative ideas and values about gender thrive. Yet the trans individuals I interviewed had complicated relationships with the gendered linguistic terrain of the region. The participants reflected on the fact that there were not only challenging and harmful aspects of gendering address terms, but also opportunities for gender euphoria as well as inclusion and acceptance. In this chapter I explore how participants observed a potential tension between linguistic practices that indexed “Southernness” and those that indexed “trans-inclusiveness,” yet how trans Southerners found ways in which these positionalities could intersect and connect.

4.2 Trans Life in the South

In the introduction to the collection *Queer South Rising: Voices of a Contested Place*, Reta Whitlock writes: “I love the South, but loving the South is mighty tricky” (Whitlock, 2013, p. xxii). Like Whitlock, many queer Southerners grapple with the histories of the Confederacy and the legacies of slavery and racism in the region. Current conservative politics and anti-queer and anti-trans legislation can make the region seem inhospitable to queer survival and thriving. Furthermore, within mainstream U.S. discourses, there is a popular narrative that queer and trans people from the U.S. South want to “escape” their “backwards” and “hillbilly” communities and move to “the big city,” typically portrayed as liberal urban enclaves in the West and North, such as San Francisco and New York (Law, 2001). Some trans Southerners do desire to leave the region and make a new home. Conservative religious ideals, difficulty accessing LGBTQ+ specific resources, minimal job opportunities, and conflict with family
are reasons that often motivate “a great migration” to other areas of the United States (A. H. Johnson et al., 2020).

Research, however, has shown that many trans individuals do in fact stay and make their home in the U.S. South (Abelson, 2019; Rogers, 2020b). For some, staying is valuable, because the South is where they have community support and networks (sometimes with biological and sometimes with chosen families), and simply, it is their home. Often, a lower cost of living is pointed to as one benefit of living in the South. As trans people overall have lower incomes than their cis counterparts (Movement Advancement Project, 2015), some trans people find it necessary to live in areas with affordable cost of living. While research on queer and trans Southerners has complicated the notion that queer and trans people are leaving the region, much of this work continues to focus overwhelmingly on the experiences of white queer Southerners. Research on queer Black life in the South (Eaves, 2017; E. P. Johnson, 2011, 2018) has explored the experiences of Black queer individuals who “have made a conscious choice to remain in the South… even in light of southerners’ continued conservative attitudes toward racial and sexual minorities” (E.P. Johnson, 2011: 2).

Finally, some queer and trans Southerners feel compelled to stay because of the assumption that people like them would leave the South. While they recognize some issues that are prevalent in the region, they have a desire to make change in the place that raised them, and to show younger queer and trans people that there is space in the South for them. Research on LGBTQ+ communities in the South has shown that queer activists take pride in building and sustaining the vision of a queer South (Pope, 2021).
4.3 Navigating Stereotypes of Southern American English

In addition to deciding whether to physically leave or stay in the South, queer and trans Southerners also need to navigate whether they want to use Southern American English (SAE) and “sound Southern.” Within some Southern communities, there are salient folk ideologies that hold that “sounding Southern” and “sounding gay” are incompatible (Mann, 2011a). Steven Mann’s research on gay Southern men found that the gay men in his study who had a strong connection to the American South were less likely to be identified by raters as gay in a perceptual rating study. There were, however, some strong outliers: gay Southern men whose language “sound[s] both gay and southern” (Mann, 2011a, p. 159). For some Southerners, a “rootedness” or sense of connectedness to home leads to a greater maintenance of the regional variety (Reed, 2016), but this connection to region and home can be difficult for queer Southerners. My participants had to navigate this tension that was further complicated by circulating positive and negative stereotypes about SAE.

The language variety referred to as Southern American English has historically been associated primarily with white Southern users of American English and characterized popularly as a “Southern Accent” or “Southern Drawl” (Bailey, 1997; Montgomery, 1997). Circulating negative stereotypes of SAE are linked to the characterological figures of the “Hillbilly” or “Redneck” (Harkins, 2003), who are portrayed as uneducated, racist, and/or lazy. These figures function as chronotopic constructions (Bakhtin, 1981; Agha, 2015) that link varieties of Southern American English along person (“Hillbilly” or “Redneck”), place (the South) and time (“outdated” and “backward”) features. As these varieties are circulated in the media, they are “heard by many as...”
naturalized icons of the stereotypical backwardness of the redneck’s intellect and morality,” (Chun, 2018). Due to the social stigma often associated with SAE varieties, there have been some efforts to assimilate Southern children to standardized language norms, and some features have been shown to decrease in use across generations (Bridwell, 2019). Trans Southerners who might want to align themselves with progressive values thus might avoid using SAE features that are perceived to index conservative social positions.

While some stereotypes of SAE tie the variety to negative caricatures, other studies of language attitudes have found that SAE is often evaluated as friendly, aligning with stereotypes of Southern politeness and hospitality (Preston, 2007). Work on politeness has theorized that polite forms are relational strategies for handling face-threatening acts, with forms of “positive politeness” and “negative politeness” (Brown et al., 1987). Davies (2007) argues that Southern politeness utilizes both forms, with certain address terms such as sir and ma’am acting as forms of negative politeness and others, such as sugar and honey, acting as forms of positive politeness. Overall, values of Southern Charm, hospitality, and politeness are taken up as a positive representation of Southern identity. For example, Sara Lide’s (2014) work on Southern sorority girls showed how they “embrac[ed] Southern politeness…to inhabit a positive Southern linguistic identity” (p. 62). Furthermore, in locally circulating discourses of politeness, using sir/ma’am is the proper way to be Southern and to do politeness (Kazek, 2019; Peper, 2016). In the next section, I address how these politeness norms are particularly complicated for trans Southerners.
4.4 Politeness and Respect in SAE

Because of politeness norms in Southern American English, my trans participants grappled with the expectation of the use of (often gendered) address terms. Southern address terms, which are labels used to address someone in the place of a name, include sir, ma’am, Miss./Mrs./Mr., y’all, folks, darling, sugar, honey (Dunkling, 2008). As noted above, two of the most common address terms used in the South are sir and ma’am (Davies, 2007). While sir and ma’am are used in other varieties of English across the United States, they usually have a more limited use outside the South: to address older adults with respect and to address people within military contexts. In the South, they have a more expanded use; for example, the use of sir/ma’am is often required in response to a yes/no question from one’s parents (Johnstone, 2003), and “a southerner can take failure to soften the bald yes or no with the address term as a serious breach of politeness or etiquette” (Davies, 2007, p. 175). Employees in the service industry are also expected to use these terms to address patrons as a display of respect.

Sir and ma’am are multifunctional and do not exclusively index gender. These address terms can indicate deference in regard to different intersectional social hierarchies such as race, class, and regional identity. Further, these terms exist within complex histories of Southern social values of respect and politeness (Livingston & Livingston, 2014), which are not only related to cisnormative ideologies, but ideologies of race and class as well (Johnstone, 1992). For example, under Jim Crow etiquette, white adults were expected to be referred to by sir and ma’am while Black adults were not granted such honorifics and were just referred to by their first names. In fact, Black adults were expected to use
these forms even when addressing white children\textsuperscript{11}. Despite these histories of white supremacy and cisnormativity, the use of \textit{sir} and \textit{ma'am} often continue to be expected as markers of appropriate community politeness norms, as trans Southerners know.

In addition to \textit{sir} and \textit{ma'am}, titles such as \textit{Miss}/\textit{Mrs.} and \textit{Mr.} preceding a first or last name are also commonly expected. When addressing larger groups of people, one might hear \textit{ladies and gentlemen}, which again reinscribes the binary gender roles expected by Southern cultural and linguistic norms (Roberts, 2003). As I will explore later in the chapter, however, some Southern American English address terms such as \textit{y'all} and \textit{folks} have been taken up as gender-inclusive options to address a group of people.

Trans people in many parts of the United States are aware of the everyday ways in which they can be gendered by others (often through the assumption of gendered pronouns), however, trans people in the South must navigate these gendered address terms as a part of the cultural and linguistic terrain of the region. In this chapter, I explore first how trans participants characterized the gendered sociolinguistic landscape of the South as distinct from other regions of the United States. I then show how these gendered linguistic practices of the region provided, as one participant put it, “[an] opportunity for lots of dysphoria or lots of euphoria” (Example 4.4). I conclude with a look at how one part of everyday trans linguistic activism was done through adequation (Bucholtz &

\textsuperscript{11} Because of these histories where Black people were denied such honorifics, these politeness forms are sometimes recognized as even more important to use within the Black community. I was told by some younger white Southerners that they had been socialized to take extra care to use \textit{sir}, \textit{ma’am}, and \textit{Mr./Mrs.} to respectfully interact with older members of the Black community.
Hall, 2004a) with cis Southerners based on a shared valorization of the Southern ideals of kindness and respect. I show that while some trans Southerners had different uptakes and rejections of Southern politeness norms, they did not reject a Southern identity.

4.5 Gendering Language in the South

For this analysis, I draw on discussion from eight participants from across six interviews. When recruiting participants, I encouraged all trans people living in South Carolina, or those who had lived in South Carolina for significant periods of time, to participate in the interviews. One participant had only been living in South Carolina for a bit less than a year, while others had been living in the state for over four decades. In this analysis, I focus on evaluations of Southern language practices by trans participants who had been living in South Carolina for either their entire lives, or majority of their lives.

Table 4.1 Participants featured in Chapter 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years in SC</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Int #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>they/them</td>
<td>nonbinary</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Caucasian, Latina</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>they/them</td>
<td>trans masc</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemary</td>
<td>they/them</td>
<td>nonbinary, trans</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demetria</td>
<td>they/she</td>
<td>Nonbinary, femm</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parker</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>transgender</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irvin</td>
<td>they/them</td>
<td>genderqueer</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryoung</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pickles</td>
<td>they/them</td>
<td>nonbinary, trans</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to note six of these eight participants identified their race as white, and only one as Latina and Caucasian, one as Asian American, and one as Black.

As noted above, given that address terms exist within complex racialized
histories of Southern social values of respect and politeness, it was likely that white participants oriented differently to the use (or not) of these terms than participants of color. In this chapter, as I address how this set of trans South Carolinians navigated Southern politeness norms and how they were understood as distinct from norms in other regions, I recognize that what is reflected in the analysis likely prioritizes the perspectives of white participants.

While linguistic gendering is a daily occurrence for trans people in many regions, trans Southerners do understand that living in the region poses unique cultural and linguistic challenges from other regions of the United States. Throughout the group interviews, I asked my participants what life was like for them as trans people in South Carolina. Some responses began with groans, as participants acknowledged the many challenges that they faced as trans people in the South. They talked about the struggle of finding trans community, the lack of medical resources, and the conservative political and cultural milieu that led to a lack of general understanding of trans identity.

When the topic of language in the South emerged in the interviews, some participants talked about how gendering practices in the South were distinct from those in other regions of the United States, such as the West or the North. The South’s distinctiveness became salient to them especially when traveling to other regions and noticing the ways in which the gendered linguistic landscape differed from that at home. For example, in the following, J contrasts Northern states with Southern states, also describing the experience of traveling “up North” (line 2) and realizing how it is very different from life “down here” (line 5):
Example 4.1: “Gender is just used a lot more down here”
J – they/them (Interview 11)
1 I’ve also noticed that like
2 and I noticed this a lot more when we travel up North versus down South.
3 you know in the South.
4 there’s always yes~ma’am~no~ma’am~yes~sir~no~sir
5 so I feel like gender is used a lot more down here?
6 all the time.
7 like it’d just be nice if I could say yes and hand you your stuff?

J notes that they recognize the different gendered linguistic practices when they travel in the North compared to the South. They say that “gender is just used a lot more down here, all the time” (line 5), specifically pointing to the use of sir and ma’am. They reflect on their dislike of this practice, and they wish that there was a way to avoid gendering people in public (line 6-7).

J’s reflection demonstrates the deep ties between these linguistic practices to a shared culture of respect and politeness in the South, which J is worried about disrupting by not using the terms of respect, or by correcting people who use the wrong ones. They are aware that critiquing people’s use of these respectful address terms can in turn be seen as impolite and not appropriate within the norms of the community. As I will discuss later in this chapter, some trans people in the South utilize an appeal to this shared culture of respect in order facilitate conversation about linguistic change.

Similarly, Taylor notes that they first became aware of this distinction between South Carolina and other parts of the United States on a cross-country road trip with their family:

Example 4.2: “In Oregon, people don’t gender people”
Taylor – they/them (Interview 10)
1 in Oregon, people don’t gender people.
2 I mean there’s so:me
Like (.) actually
so I messed up
because I’m really used to calling people sir and ma’am
because that was something that was taught to me like from a
very young age?
and I went to a pizza place
and one of the people who was running the counter at the pizza
place
I’m pretty sure they were nonbinary
and I gendered them out of like habit
out of like oh wait I’m with my mom
I’m in a public place I need to use ma’am and sir
or she’ll get mad at me?
[lines removed where Taylor talks about feeling bad for misgendering the
service worker at the pizza place]
um (.) a:nd the other thing is like
so last summer I drove across the country.
because my family moved from South Carolina to Oregon.
and there was a very clear line in Idaho?
where there started being gender neutral bathrooms?
and where I am it’s most like-
no one gives a shit what bathroom you go into ((whispered))
like sometimes they’re marked
but then men will still go into the women’s bathroom
or something like that.
and it’s like no big dea:l.

Taylor begins by highlighting the salient difference between South Carolina and
Oregon: “In Oregon, people don’t gender people” (line 1). While this may seem
hyperbolic, they draw attention to the distinction they felt from the constant
casual gendering they felt in South Carolina. This change in linguistic practices is
compounded by the “very clear line” (line 23) they felt when all-gender
bathrooms became available in Idaho. The organization of the physical space and
existence (or not) of all-gender bathrooms is mapped onto the linguistic terrain.
In the South, before Taylor crosses the “line,” there are spaces where people are
expected to say ma’am and sir, and there are no all-gender bathrooms. After
driving past the “line” there are all-gender bathrooms and places where “people don’t gender people” (line 1).

Like J, Taylor constructs an image of the Southern linguistic landscape as distinct from the inclusive West/North. This distinction became even clearer to Taylor once they arrived in Oregon, where they became hyperaware of their own ingrained habit of using *sir* and *ma’am*, recognizing that it was not appropriate in this context (lines 5-13). Like many of my participants, Taylor recognized that they had been socialized into the cultural politeness norms of the South and because of that, found using *sir* and *ma’am* had become an ingrained “habit” (line 10).

Further, as Taylor recounts a service encounter in a pizza shop, they note that they thought, “I’m in a public place, I need to use *sir* and *ma’am*” (line 11). The context of service encounters was a highly salient one for my participants (see Example 4.1 where J describes the expectation of a service worker to use *sir* and *ma’am* when handing people “their stuff” (line 7)). From both the employee and customer perspectives, Southern politeness norms govern these interactions, and shape the expectations of what is understood to be appropriate demonstrations of respect. While Taylor is critical of the practice of using gendered address terms, they note that their mom would “get mad” (line 12) at them if they were not appropriately polite to service workers. When they enter a new place outside of the context of the South, where gendering language is not expected, Taylor realizes how the Southern values of politeness and respect have been instilled in them and regret to have participated in a linguistic system that upholds the gender binary, saying, "I didn't mean to do that" (line 19).
For these trans Southerners, the norm of demonstrating respect via
gendered address terms was typical of their experiences in the South. In some
instances, they noted that this specific linguistic practice only became salient
after leaving the region and traveling to other parts of the United States.
Participants had differing responses to expectations of using *sir* and *ma’am*. In the
next two sections I will explore how some trans people found the practice
affirming of their gender while others worked to bring non-gendered
alternatives to Southern politeness practices.

4.6 The Joys and Challenges of *Sir* and *Ma’am*

Widely circulating discourses about the South in the United States
characterize the region as “backward” and generally a place where conservative
values about gender thrive. This view of the South informs the expectation that
many trans people desire to leave the region and move to a place where
everyday gendering might occur less frequently, or where politeness norms rely
less on the use of binary address terms like *sir* and *ma’am*. While many trans
people recognize that the experience of everyday gendering can be exhausting,
some of my participants found the practice of being called *sir* and *ma’am*
affirming of their gender. They responded to these linguistic practices with
thoughtful metalinguistic awareness of the benefits and challenges of the practice
for trans people in the region.

Many of my interlocutors discussed the perils of navigating public spaces
and service encounters where they would face the casual gendering of *sir* and
*ma’am*. Not all of my interviewees, however, found this to be a unilaterally bad
experience. In one group interview, Ryoung, a trans woman, and Parker, a trans
man, talked about the stress of navigating gendered everyday interactions and
the joy of being gendered correctly.

Example 4.3: “It’s going to make my day”
Ryoung – she/her (Interview 15)
1 every morning (.) I go to QT. ((Quik Trip, a convivence store))
2 and if there’s a particular cler- cler- clerk there,
3 it’s making- it’s gonna make my day because she always properly
genders me.
4 if she’s not there it’s going to be a terrible day until I get to work.
5 uhhh (.) I- normally it’s sir sir sir sir sir sir sir.
6 And it’s only every once in a while-
7 like, I get really happy when I get called ma’am.

Ryoung notes that her mood is directly affected by the presence or absence of a
particular clerk who genders her correctly. If the clerk is not there, others
typically her “sir, sir, sir, sir, sir, sir, sir, sir” (line 5), which can make her have a
“terrible day” (line 4). But if the clerk is there (line 2) or if others also call her
ma’am (line 6), it can be the highlight of her day (line 2-4) and she “get[s] really
happy” (line 6).

As the conversation continues, Parker builds on what Ryoung has said
about being gendered in daily interactions. Parker, as a trans man who had been
taking testosterone for over three years, notes that the gendering norms of the
South provide ample positive possibilities.

Example 4.4: “the South gives you an opportunity”
Parker – he/him (Interview 15)
1 uh I- it’s definitely
2 the South gives you an opportunity for a lot of dysphoria or a lot of
euphoria
3 you know (.) everywhere else I’ve gone you don’t get nearly as many
gendered ma’am’s~and~sir’s anywhere else.
4 um but you know I still get a little jolt of happy when people say sir
5 and it's most- it's you know I have- I’ve been on testosterone for (.)
three: four years now?
um and like I got a tiny~little~beard?
I had- my voice’s dropping a little so like
I’m lucky enough that I don’t get misgendered very often
and when that happens usually it’s like an accident.
but hey I still get that little like jolt of like,

oh yes properly they saw: me:

Parker notes that living in the South “gives you an opportunity for a lot of
dysphoria or a lot of euphoria” (line 1). As someone who enjoys being called sir,
in the instances when it does happen (because of his “tiny little beard” and
dropping voice), Parker feels that his gender is validated. When he goes to other
places outside of the region, he doesn’t have the same opportunities to feel
casually affirmed by being called sir, which he enjoys. Unlike Ryoung, for whom
misgendering is common, Parker notes that he “doesn’t get misgendered very
often” (line 7), but that it can still occasionally happen. However, like Ryoung, he
shares the experience of feeling a “jolt of happy” (line 3) when he feels like he has
been properly seen by his interlocutor (line 10).

Ryoung and Parker both held space for the challenges of navigating
Southern gendering: they acknowledged that it could feel bad to go about their
day getting misgendered, but they also recognized that there were aspects of
gendering language norms that felt good to them. In the pre-interview survey,
Ryoung described her gender as “female” and Parker described his as “male.”
While both claimed the label transgender and understood themselves to be part of
trans communities, “passing,” or being perceived as a (cis) woman or man was
likely very gender affirming for them.12 This practice of feeling affirmed as one’s

12 “Passing” is a complicated experience for many transgender people. While it can lead to being
gendered correctly in public space, it sometimes comes with a fear that one will then be
“discovered” to not be cisgender, which can result in anti-trans violence. The ability to “pass” is
gender was primarily beneficial for trans people, like Ryoung and Parker, who aligned with binary gender categories or felt affirmed by the address terms of *ma’am* and *sir*.

For some trans and nonbinary people, however, neither address term felt quite accurate. People for whom this gendering was never affirming had a more vested interest in thinking about other options besides *sir* and *ma’am*. In the next section, I will show how some trans and nonbinary activists created alternative options that would continue to maintain Southern values of politeness and respect without using gendered address terms.

### 4.7 A Shared Value of Respect

As noted above, the experience of everyday gendering in the South could be exhausting for trans Southerners. Because of this, some trans activists in the South wanted to explore alternatives that could be used in the community to replace *sir* and *ma’am*. While one might assume that this rejection of *sir* and *ma’am* might reflect a rejection of the Southern values that these address terms often indexed, participants in the interviews instead demonstrated that they in fact wanted to replace specific politeness practices (such as *sir* and *ma’am*), without rejecting Southern values.

In one interview, I spoke with Irvin and Pickles, two long-time activists and organizers for trans rights in South Carolina. The two of them were good friends, and they both had spent many years working in response to anti-trans legislation in the state and building community networks of trans people in the

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*additional text*
South. Both had been born and raised in South Carolina and were committed their lives to making South Carolina a better place for trans people. Therefore, they were both very familiar with Southern cultural and linguistic norms and values and though frequently about how to have conversations about gender inclusion with cisgender Southerners.

During the interview, Irvin discussed their experiences of offering trainings about trans inclusive practices for primarily cisgender audiences in the region. These trainings often took place in workplaces with the goal of engaging in more diversity and inclusion initiatives, and they provided a “trans-101” workshop session that addressed definitions of terminology and suggestions for being more inclusive to trans clients. Irvin noted that the issue of sir and ma’am “comes up in my trainings a lot” (line 2). In their response to these questions, they drew on a presumed shared prioritization of “Southern values” of respect, politeness, and kindness when encouraging attendees of the training to use more inclusive language:

Example 4.5: “there are lots of other ways you can show respect”
Irvin- they/them (Interview 14)
2  um it comes up in my trainings a lot
3  and one thing that I’ll say is um
4  to folks who are struggling with that is to think
5  so your goal is to be respectful.
6  now you know that making-
7  and in the scenario that we talk about normally is like-
8  you’re- you’re making assumptions about somebody’s gender:
9  and we know that now you know? better- that that is actually going to be very disrespectful.
10  um to this like fairly large segment of the population
11  I mean the South is home to more than five-hundred thousand trans people.
12  that’s not- that’s not an insignificant number of people.
13  um BUT it’s also been super ingrained in us to say sir and ma’am
14  and to be respectful: also: in the South.
um so sometimes it helps to add another syllable (.) at the end.
so like instead of (.) thank you sir or-
just thank you so much
like you just felt like something was missing
and NOBODY has ever said to me thank you so much.
and I have walked away from that conversation feeling like
they are just so rude. ((in high pitch voice))

Irvin describes their strategy for challenging the assumptions that transness and Southernness are incompatible and that trans people leave and don’t live in the South. First, they remind the people in the training that these categories of “trans people” and “Southerners” are not mutually exclusive; in fact, “the South is home to more than five-hundred thousand trans people” (line 11).

Additionally, when talking about leading trainings and having conversations about gender inclusive language, Irvin positions themself as also a Southerner who has had to re-learn these politeness norms. They use “we” and “us” (lines 9 and 13) to show that they too have been habituated into the norms of using sir and ma’am. Then, once they have established a shared identity of Southernness, they can move on to their goal of finding trans-inclusive language.

In having these conversations, Irvin invokes a shared value of respect. They say that for both trans and cis Southerners, the “goal is to be respectful” (line 5). The aim is to persuade their audience that working to be respectful to trans people is in fact an extension of the Southern value of respect. They argue that the goal of language is to show respect to one’s interlocutor, and that there are many ways to do it besides using sir and ma’am. In other words, they claim that using trans-inclusive language can index Southernness, that Southernness and trans-inclusiveness are not opposed.
Once they have established this shared value of using language in a respectful manner, Irvin is able to provide solutions to the issue of binary *sir* and *ma’am*. They describe their solution to me: “just add another syllable at the end” (line 15). They argue that if the habit of saying “thank you, sir” is so ingrained, people can attempt to retrain themselves by saying “thank you, so much.” Whether or not this analysis of why people find it so hard to stop saying *sir* and *ma’am* is accurate, it functions to validate cis Southerners’ desires to maintain cultural norms of respect while providing an alternative that does not depend on assuming the genders of interlocutors.

In response to Irvin’s examples of navigating the trainings, Pickles talks about their own ways of engaging in the conversation about changing Southern language norms.

**Example 4.6: “can you say yes, please?”**

**Pickles- they/them (Interview 14)**
1 and then the times like when someone says yes sir: (.) no sir: (.) no ma’am.
2 **you know- can you say yes please?**
3 **yes thank you? no thank you? instead?**
4 **hhh like are those- you know- please and thank you.**
5 **very polite um yeah**
6 and it definitely- it fucks with me too sometimes
7 because I was raised to be- to say sir and ma’am all the time
8 and ladies and gentlemen and like (.) ((outbreath)) that- it slips out
9 you know it does um it comes out from time to time
10 it’s hard to- to re-train yourself
11 but it’s all about muscle memory.
12 so the more you practice
13 the more- the better you’ll be at it
14 which is what I tell people you know cis het folks or um just cis folks

Pickles builds on Irvin’s suggestions of “thank you, so much” and adds that people could replace “yes, sir” and “no, ma’am” with “yes, please” or “no, thank
you” (line 3-4), noting that “please and thank you” are “very polite” (line 4-5). Both Pickles and Irvin work to assuage the fears that by rejecting the practice of addressing people as sir and ma’am that people will also be rejecting politeness values of the community. Indeed, they both work to show that there are ways to embrace the goal of politeness and respect of others in a way that is trans-inclusive.

As someone who was also raised in the South, Pickles (like Taylor in Example 4.2 and Irvin in Example 4.5, related to the ingrained nature of using sir and ma’am as terms of respect (lines 6-7). In this way, Pickles aligned themself with all Southerners who find the transition away from using sir and ma’am to be difficult. In addition to providing lexical alternatives, Pickles described how they suggested to cis folks some tactics to overcome this challenge: it is about “re-train[ing] yourself and “practic[ing]” so that you can develop new “muscle memory” (lines 10-14). While the terms of sir and ma’am were often described as “ingrained” by my participants, they recognized that politeness was a practice that had to be developed and could be shifted to be more gender inclusive. Despite the gendering practices that were common in the South, these activists provided various alternatives that in turn embraced their Southerness and Southern identity.

4.8 Possibilities of the Trans South

Although many of the community members focused their discussions about Southern American English on the struggles of navigating the specific gendered expectations of interactions and gendering address terms such as sir and ma’am, there were some aspects of Southern American speech that had unique possibilities for inclusivity—specifically the terms you’ and folks. In the
next example, one participant, Rosemary, discusses their own incorporation of these specific Southern American English features back into their language after many years of distancing themself from a Southern identity.

**Example 4.7: “I like, rejected my Southerness”**

**Rosemary- they/them (Interview 2)**

1. I am like trying to undo like
2. cause I like rejected my Southerness like all of my life
3. and never wanted to use y’all
4. and try to use like gu:ys or du:des
5. and then I was like
6. oh shit that’s not that’s not
7. that’s like very invalidating to people who are like trans women
8. and such for some of them.
9. and so I’ve like been reworking y’all back into
10. and I use folks a lot.

Growing up, Rosemary wanted to distance themself from a Southern identity based on negative evaluations of the variety, and they would try to remove SAE features from their vocabulary (lines 2-3). But upon reflection as a trans adult, they realized that the terms they had adopted such as *guys* and *dudes* were less inclusive than lexical items they already had at their disposal in SAE. After that realization, Rosemary worked to reclaim *y’all* and *folks* as aspects of a Southern identity that actually are gender-inclusive and that reflect their values as a trans person.

Specifically, *y’all* has been taken up by Southern groups working of LGBTQ+ Inclusion. This can be seen in the spread of the phrase “*y’all means all*” to index the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in the U.S. South. The phrase rose in popularity following the backlash against HB2 in North Carolina (Daley, 2016), and continued to spread with the Southern Poverty Law Center’s “*Y’all Means All*” Campaign (*Y’all Means All*, n.d.). “*Y’all means all*” has been included in
merchandise, art, and graphics that combine the phrase with state outlines and rainbow imagery (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Screenshot of Google Image search results for “Y’all means all South Carolina”

Because of the utility of y’all as an inclusive alternative to you guys, y’all has begun to spread to communities outside of the South that are seeking to find more inclusive language practices. In an online survey, 319 non-Southerners who had classified themselves as “late y’all adopters” reported “inclusivity” and “gender-neutrality” as key reasons for their use of the term (McCurdy 2021). Among my participants, there were some critiques of the spread of y’all, citing the marginalization of the variety when it is used by Southerners themselves, which causes some individuals to stop using an SAE variety, such as Rosemary’s experience. Some participants, however, expressed that y’all and folks have utility for non-Southern communities, and they like that some aspect of Southern identity was valued positively outside of the region. While many discussions of the Southern politeness norms among the participants focused on gendering features, there are features of the variety that are more inclusive than other regional varieties. In addition to the re-working of politeness norms that Irvin
and Pickles suggest, Rosemary points to features in the variety that already have expansive possibilities for inclusion.

Finally, many participants did recognize that staying in the South was not always a given. In this chapter, I focused on participants who continued to live in South Carolina for much of their lives, but they too noted that there had been moments when they had considered leaving. For example, one participant, Demetria, talked about what motivates them to stay when they are considering leaving:

**Example 4.8: Why am I here?**

_Demetria- they/she (Interview 18)_

1. D: um so I _definitely_ consider leaving all the time. hhh. hhh.
2. A: 
3. D: all the time.
4. A: I- how can I say this- why am I here?
5. D: that is the question
6. A: why am I here?
7. D: well I'm- I'm close to my family
8. which um my mom literally lives fifteen minutes away. *lines removed where Demetria talks more about their family*
9. A: so I don't want to leave the South necessarily.
10. D: I want to stay in the Carolinas because as someone that is a healer.
12. D: like really my focus in the community that I want to impact-
13. A: sorry I'm looking at my cat-
14. D: the community I want to impact and work with and create these spaces for
15. A: um and so I want to stay in the Carolinas because I want to create those spaces where people are- just be a presence where people can feel affirmed.
16. A: even if that's in passing by:
17. D: even if it's going into a queer space and seeing another trans person?
18. A: and just making sure I'm calling them the name that they want to be called and hugging them and just giving _so much love to them_
For Demetria, there are moments when they consider leaving the region, but they also recognize that staying in the Carolinas means she would be able to create community spaces and have an impact on the queer and trans community in the region. Importantly, they note the importance of “calling [trans people] the name that they want to be called” (line 25) to continue to create places in the South where trans people can “feel affirmed” (line 22). Whether by using (or not using) *sir* and *ma’am*, saying “folks” and “y’all” instead of “guys,” or by calling a person by their chosen name, there are many ways to linguistically affirm trans people. And by staying in the South and working to create these changes, many of these trans Southerners see a possible future for trans life in the South.

### 4.9 Conclusion

For trans Southerners, the gendering linguistic practices of Southern American English posed a unique linguistic terrain to traverse. Going anywhere, whether the gas station or a pizza place, could involve navigating being gendered by strangers. While this may have seemed like a fraught situation for trans and nonbinary Southerners, some trans Southerners felt validated by the practice when they were correctly gendered by their interlocutor. Further, some trans Southerners provided possible alternatives to the practice of using *sir* and *ma’am* that would still maintain the values of Southern friendliness, politeness, and respect. And finally, when looking at SAE beyond just *sir* and *ma’am*, trans Southerners found possibilities for inclusion: specifically, with *y’all*, which had been embraced by queer and trans Southerners in the slogan “*y’all means all*”.

I do not claim that life in the U.S. South was easy for trans individuals, who still faced institutional barriers, a lack of access to healthcare, ongoing anti-trans legislation across the region, and a lack of protection against employment
discrimination and harassment. Furthermore, widespread cultural maintenance of cisnormativity emerged not only in institutional settings, but in the gendering address terms used in Southern American English. Mainstream accounts of Southern life and identity often assume that Southernness and transness might be incompatible and that most trans Southerners would want to leave or distance themselves from Southern values. While there were challenging aspects of the gendering linguistic practices of Southern American English that my participants encountered, many trans people were finding ways to exist and thrive in the South. In navigating cultural norms of the South, trans South Carolinians continued to prioritize Southern values but did so in a way that envisioned expansive Southern futures that were welcoming to trans people.

It is crucial to explore they ways in which trans Southerners navigated the sociolinguistic landscape of the region. Linguistic scholarship on Southern American English must take into account the ways in which trans and nonbinary Southerners are pushing forward conversations about gendering address terms, and conversely, studies of trans linguistic practices must move beyond the privileging of trans life in coastal metropolises.
CHAPTER 5: INTERGENERATIONAL LANGUAGE EVALUATIONS WITHIN TRANSGENDER COMMUNITIES

5.1 Introduction

English terminology used to talk about transgender communities, and gender diverse communities more generally, has undergone significant change over the past five decades in the United States. Prior to this, in response to terminology that was often either derogatory, pathologizing, or both, gender diverse communities have developed and reclaimed language felt to be affirming and accurate descriptions of their lived experiences (See Stryker, 2008 for terms and definitions that have shifted over time). Furthermore, as online communities allow for greater connection between transgender people, trans communities have continued to develop and share labels that capture the nuances of trans experiences (Brown, 2022; Zimman & Hayworth, 2021).

Because the language preferred by transgender people to talk about transgender identities has continually undergone shift, many activist and advocacy organizations have worked to educate cisgender communities about terminology that is considered widely appropriate when talking about transgender communities. Educational materials often circulated in pamphlets, workshops and trainings, and social media infographics have been crucial for fostering respect for transgender people by advocating for the use of language that is less dehumanizing or hurtful (Zimman, 2017b).
These tactics, while strategically useful, often elide the fact that trans communities are heterogeneous in terms of their views about what constitutes “appropriate” or “preferred” language and attempts to standardize language are often highly contested. Such heterogeneity arises from the fact that multiple axes of difference, including race, class, gender, sexuality, and age, shape the lived experiences of trans people and linguistic norms within trans communities. As this chapter suggests, age, in particular, constitutes an important dimension of sociocultural differentiation among members, not only because transgender life “milestones,” including identity exploration, coming out, and gender transition, differ from those in cisnormative narratives of life progression (Eckert, 2003; Pearce, 2018) but also because historical shifts in trans visibility have led to changes in when, and even whether, such milestones are possible. Importantly, an individual’s “trans age,” or time spent as an “out” trans person, typically differs greatly from their chronological age, given that many trans people “come out” at different ages, most often during adolescence and adulthood. Within trans communities, experiences of both chronological age as well as trans age impact how intergenerational relationships and norms of expertise are formed, which then play a role in evaluations of generational language practices.

In this chapter, based on the analysis of ten excerpts from six interviews, I argue that despite how trans experiences of age may generally differ from those of their cis counterparts, the participants who took part in interviews also reproduced ideologies of generational difference that circulated beyond trans communities. The complex nature of “trans age” provides nuance to how these age-based stereotypes might be distinct within trans communities. This chapter examines in-group debates about language, specifically reflecting the
perspectives of different age groups. My analysis of interview excerpts illustrates how participants reproduce stereotypes about both older and younger trans speakers. First, younger community members critiqued older trans adults’ linguistic practices as “cringy,” “outdated,” and even “offensive.” Second, the stereotypical figure of the “woke” young trans activist who was overly militant about terminology was circulated by both older and younger trans participants. Through their evaluations, participants oriented to two key characterological figures (Agha, 2003): the “old trans curmudgeon” and “young trans activist.”

Despite the uptake of negative stereotypes, many participants also expressed a desire for mutual intergenerational respect. On the one hand, positive assessments of trans youth language by older trans participants valorized young community members for being “pioneers” who have “broken out of that mold in the script that was written for them” (see Example 5.5). In fact, in contrast to the stereotype of the older adult who was unwilling to learn and change, various older participants demonstrated a desire to learn new terminology. On the other hand, younger trans speakers reflected on the wisdom that older trans adults could share and recognized that language change made the uptake of new terminology difficult for older trans adults.

5.2 Changing Language about Transgender People

Terminology used to talk about people who do not conform to cisnormative ideas of sex and gender has been, and continues to be, malleable. Part of this change arises from the fact that the boundaries between gender categories themselves have not remained stable, as understandings of who might be transsexual, transgender, or gender diverse have shifted. Even the term transgender within the United States must be understood as a legacy of
colonialism, through which European colonizers imposed a rigid gender binary upon Indigenous communities, many of which recognized identities outside of the gender binary, such as two spirit individuals (Davis, 2019; Leo, 2020). When gender diversity was recognized in European contexts, it was primarily through a pathological lens within the medical system. In the early twentieth century, the work of German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld introduced two terms that were popularly used for transgender people throughout the 1900s: transexual and transvestite. The noun transexual rose to prominence in the 1950s with the work of German American endocrinologist Dr. Harry Benjamin, in the widely circulated media response to Benjamin’s “sex change” surgery on Christine Jorgenson. Having further popularized the term transsexual in his 1966 book, The Transsexual Phenomenon, Benjamin was a strong proponent of providing sex reassignment surgeries, and his influence led to the opening of many gender identity clinics in metropolitan areas to provide access to aspects of medical transition such as hormone therapy and gender affirming surgeries. Coming out of this medical model, transsexuality was generally understood to be a movement from one binary gender to another through medical interventions. Benjamin distinguished the noun transsexual, or someone who wanted to change their physical body (or “sex”), from the noun transvestite, which focused on changes in dress. Early uses of the word transvestite were similar in some ways to how transgender was used in the 1990s, referring to a range of gender expressions and identities. However, transvestite “now usually carries with it the stigmatized connotation of cross-dressing in a fetishistic manner for erotic pleasure” (Stryker, 2006) and is considered pejorative. Crucially, the changes in clothing made by transvestites were typically understood to be temporary.
Historical accounts of the word *transgender* often attribute the coining of the term to Virginia Prince,\(^\text{13}\) an activist from Southern California (Stryker 2008). In response to the terms *transvestite* and *transsexual*, Prince used the term *transgender* to name identities that were considered to fall somewhere between the temporariness of clothing changes associated with the term *transvestite* and the permanency of surgical interventions associated with the term *transsexual*. With this understanding, the noun *transgender* focused on a person whose social change was “permanent” but who did not pursue medical aspects of transition.

It was Leslie Feinberg’s (1992) use of the term in *zir* book *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time has Come* that truly expanded the bounds of the category. Feinberg defines *transgender* as an “umbrella term,” including all “‘gender outlaws’: transvestites, transsexuals, drag queens and drag kings, cross-dressers, bull-daggers, stone butches, androgynes, diesel dykes or berdache—a European colonialist term” (p. 5). This usage went far beyond previous understandings of the category as it included not only gender identities but also forms of gender expression. Stryker (2006) notes that it was in Feinberg’s usage that *transgender* came to mean “something else entirely—an adjective rather than a noun” (p. 4). This lexical category shift from noun to adjective relates to how “kinds” vs “characteristics” are understood. The use of *transgender* as an adjective often was strategically leveraged to legitimize a trans person’s identity as a man or woman: *trans* was a way of describing an experience of man, woman, or personhood rather than an entirely separate gender category.

\(^{13}\) Historian KJ Rawson has noted that an even earlier use of the term *transgender* can be attributed to psychiatrist John F. Olivan who used the term within a medical context to refer to people who felt an “urge for gender (‘sex’) change” (Rawson 2015). However, most popular tellings draw the origins back to Prince.
The rapid rise of the term *transgender* seems to have increased exponentially around 1995 likely due to the expansion of access to the internet (Stryker, 2006, p. 6). In the decades following the move to *transgender*\(^{14}\) as the most widely used community label, terminology used to refer to gender diverse communities has continued to expand, especially given the rapid pace of language shift in online trans communities (Zimman & Hayworth, 2020, 2021).

During the 1990s, the adjective form of *transgender* further circulated as a superordinate term for many different expressions of gender difference as a lived experience, at least primarily within a white, middle-class context (Kolysh, 2016, p. 1). Furthermore, this term often functioned to make movements of transgender activism “appear uniform through whitewashing or single-issue narratives, [thus] much oppression facing transgender people is overlooked” (p. 4). In this, the specific impacts of racism, transmisogyny, and economic barriers were often overlooked in movements for rights-based reform and legal recognition of gender identities.

In the last decade within the United States, the term *transgender* has been used to describe a wide range of genders and lived experiences, leaning upon an often cited “umbrella definition” of the term *transgender* as an “encompassing term of many gender identities of those who do not identify or exclusively identify with their sex assigned at birth” (Trans Student Educational Resources, n.d.). Within this understanding of the term, *trans* describes varied identities.

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\(^{14}\) Other shifts in the use of *transgender* have also occurred throughout this time. In earlier uses of the term, it appeared as a participle, *transgendered*. This form acts as an adjective (i.e., a. *transgendered man/woman/person*), grammatically derived from a verb. Pushback on this participial form argued that it implied that something (negative) had been done to the person. Instead, the adjective *transgender* was preferred as describing a characteristic of the person.
such as trans man, trans woman, nonbinary, and genderqueer. This definition, while common, is not uncontested within trans communities, with some trans sub-communities continuing to rely on medical criteria as central to an “authentic” trans experience (Konnelly, 2021a, 2022).

Despite these in-group debates about terminology, mainstream discussions about language change regarding gender commonly focus on educating cisgender individuals about new terminology. Advocacy on behalf of “the transgender community,” often implies a sense of unified goals, experiences, and desires as well as an agreed upon “standard” of language use. It is, however, is an imagined community (Anderson, 2006 [1983]) made up of “overlapping communities of practice, with different practices at their core—not all of which are trans specific” (Zimman, 2012, p. 76).

5.3 Age-Based Stereotypes and Intergenerational Communication

Studies of intergenerational communication find that participants enter interactions with interlocutors of different ages with salient negative age-based stereotypes (Keaton & Giles, 2016; Lin et al., 2004). Broadly circulating discourses of intergenerational communication often focus on how younger generations make fun of older adults’ language norms as “out of date” or “uncool.” Hummert’s (1994, 1995) work within communication studies and gerontology has explored stereotypes of old age, categorizing both positive stereotypes of older adults (e.g., the Perfect Grandparent, the Golden Ager, and the John Wayne Conservative) as well as negative stereotypes (e.g., Despondent, Shrew/Curmudgeon, Recluse, Severely Impaired). She explored attributes of these stereotypes, noting that older adults were described as a Shrew/Curmudgeon; for example, they were viewed as “complaining, ill-
tempered, bitter, prejudiced, demanding, inflexible, selfish, jealous, stubborn, [and] nosy” (166). In addition to these negative stereotypes of older adults, there are positive perceptions of older adults as well. For example, McKinney (2016) explores how older adults in a nursing home discursively navigate the process of “successful aging,” in one instance by inhabiting the positive stereotype of the older “sage” and “nostalgic.”

As is the case with the influence of youth culture on language change more broadly (Bucholtz, 2002; Eckert, 2003), linguistic innovation within transgender communities is typically associated with young trans communities (Erlick, 2018; Sinclair-Palm & Gilbert, 2018). Trans youth, specifically those who congregate on online spaces such as Tumblr, have developed new terminology to describe specific and nuanced gender identities (Dame, 2015; Jacobsen, 2020), what some of my participants called “micro labels.” Like forms of youth language more generally, the linguistic innovations of trans youth in online spaces like Tumblr are often ridiculed as less serious manifestations of transgender identity (Pulice-Farrow et al., 2020).

While much research explores the distinction between broader discourses of “purist elders” and “degenerate youth slang,” young people take up stances of linguistic purity and negotiate claims to linguistic authority as well (Suslak, 2009). Online spaces are frequent locations for discourses about “correct” or “appropriate” terminological use between younger trans individuals (Crowley, 2022). Within transgender communities, young innovators often assume authoritative stances towards language use, referring to language practices of older trans adults as “backward” or “outdated,” as will be seen in this chapter. These intergenerational evaluative stances wherein young speakers take up
stances of linguistic purity are not unique to trans communities; similar discourses emerge within other “progressive” spaces in which older speakers are evaluated on their uptake of new linguistic forms.

Though there is limited research on intergenerational relationships within transgender communities, Schuster (2019) documents the overlapping ideologies of age, gender, and community norms within a transgender community in the “MetroMidwest.” Within this community, both trans older adults and young people pointed to a “generation gap” when explaining differing norms about community practices such as pronoun introductions. This “generation gap” was strongly emphasized as the reason that younger and older group participants clashed with each other, rather than pointing to the differing ideologies and linguistic norms that differed among the members of different ages. Overall, there is very little research on intergenerational relationships within trans communities, which is possibly because, as noted by Russell (2005), there are very few places for actual intergenerational relationships between trans (and other LGB) youth and adults (Russell 2005). Some of my participants did have close relationships with trans individuals of different chronological ages and some did not. I focus on the ideas that they expressed about generations other than their own in order to explore the circulating ideologies of age and language within these trans communities.

5.4 The Social Construction of Age

Within social scientific research, “age” often refers to a person’s chronological age, or the number of years that a person has been alive. However, it is crucial when working with trans communities to not only attend to chronological age, but also to how participants orient themselves as “older” or
“younger” members of their communities due to conceptions of “trans time,” which I will address in this section.

Variationist sociolinguistic studies have primarily operationalized age as a variable across which linguistic variation can be described, both in terms of change over the individual lifespan well as across generations, as a means of understanding trends of language change (Wagner, 2012). This body of work has shown that young people have generally been more linguistically innovative than older people and that youth language often pushes language change forward. However, Eckert (1997) urges sociolinguists to move away from a focus on chronological age and towards a social understanding of age as it relates to life experiences. Eckert acknowledges that although “aging is universal, it is incorporated into social structures and invested with value in culturally specific ways” (155). Relatedly, work in linguistic anthropology explores how language is used in the social construction of age. For example, Berman (2014) demonstrates how adults in the Marshall Islands socialize children into the expectations of the role of child. Berman argues that the “immaturity” of the Marshallese children is not due to a developmental stage, but rather, a social stage. Further, the Marshallese children “negotiate their relative age and power” both in relation to their peers as well as in relation to the surrounding adults (2014, p. 1). This is just one example of how social practices and cultural conceptions of age shape who is understood as “young” and “old” within a community beyond biological or chronological age.

Age within transgender communities can be particularly complex, as trans people understand their “age” in relation to multiple experiences beyond the chronological kin, namely, coming out, medical transition, and community
membership. As Amin (2014) notes, it is crucial to “attend to the ways in which transgender experiences are constituted by yet exceed normative temporalities” (p. 219). First, trans people often feel pressure to tie their narratives of identity to typical norms of aging and time, such as having awareness of their gender as a child or undergoing physical transition at the same time as their cisgender peers. Despite pressures to align with such normative temporalities, for many trans people, moving through these life stages happens at a wide range of chronological ages (Amin, 2014). Another way in which “trans age” is more complex than one’s chronological age (2019) is that one’s “trans age” is also related to the length of time a person has been “out” as trans. For example, a transgender person who came out at the age of 20 in the 1990s would likely have a very different experience from someone who came out at the age of 40 in the 2010s, despite the two individuals being of the same chronological age, as their respective experiences would have been shaped by the availability of resources and cultural awareness of transness in those different decades.

Additionally, trans people’s experiences of physical/biomedical transition processes have led to descriptions of “hormone time” (Horak, 2014), suggesting that the measurement of time that one has been on hormones is particularly relevant in one’s life story. For example, an often-parodied feature of video blogs made by trans men and transmasculine people taking testosterone is the opening line “this is my voice X weeks on T.” Finally, trans people who pursue hormone replacement therapy often describe the process as a “second puberty,” drawing links to the experience of shifts in hormonal composition, but also the process of moving into a new kind of gendered adulthood.
Even intergenerational relationships of mentorship and expertise are shaped by “trans time,” specifically, the length of time that one has been “out” and participating in trans communities. For instance, it is possible for trans adults in their twenties and thirties to be seen as “trans elders,” in part because there is a lack of visibility of older trans adults, and in part because they take on the role of holding and sharing community knowledge with both chronologically older and younger trans people who are newly coming out.

The 41 participants that I interviewed ranged from 19 to 69 years old, with an average age of 30 (see Chapter 3, Table 3.2). About half of the participants were in their twenties at the time of the interviews; this is likely due to the fact that I recruited participants via online trans groups as well as university-based trans groups, in which younger trans people are active. Further, because I conducted interviews via Zoom, people who felt comfortable using video conferencing technology were also likely more willing to participate. During the time of the interviews, I was in my late twenties and an advanced doctoral student. It is likely that interviewees in their early twenties understood me as like them in some ways; for example, I understood many of their social media references and shared internet practices. Yet I was distinct from them in other ways; I was well past my undergraduate years and in some ways an “adult” who was in the role of researcher in this context. On the other hand, interviewees who were older than I was often positioned themselves as community elders, telling me stories of what it was like for them when they were younger or including me in a group consisting of young trans people. Older trans adults who had more recently come out, however, recognized that I had been well connected within trans communities for longer than they had.
Furthermore, “older” and “younger” for participants were relative characterizations. A participant in their twenties might imagine a “trans elder” to be in their thirties or forties, while those of that age might balk at that evaluation, pointing to trans elders in their sixties. Thus, in coding the interviews, I focused primarily on how participants discursively positioned themselves in relation to age and generational categories (e.g., if they used first person plural “us” or “we” when referring to “young trans people” or if they talked about “those older trans people.”) While I acknowledge that chronological age is not the only relevant age metric to these participants, it still provides some information regarding their social location, thus I include each participant’s chronological age with their pseudonyms before the transcripts.

In this analysis, I focus on moments of metalinguistic commentary (e.g., “calling out” others’ use of “problematic” terms, commenting on generational differences in terminology, and characterizing the language practices of specific groups) to explore how younger and older trans adults take various stances towards generational language practices. First, I offer an overview of the ways in which younger and older participants positioned themselves in opposition to one another and reproduced stereotypical figures of older and younger speakers. Then, I address the ways in which participants oriented to the goal of intergenerational understanding of each other’s language practices: older trans adults by recognizing the progressive innovations of younger speakers, and younger trans speakers by valuing the gained wisdom of older trans adults. In this analysis, I draw on contributions from eight participants across six interviews who range from 20 to 69 years old.
### Table 5.1. Participants Featured in Chapter 5

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Int #</th>
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<td>69</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### 5.5 Intergenerational Tensions

During the interviews, participants circulated tropes about both younger and older speakers that positioned each group in opposition to one another.

First, older adults were typically stereotyped as “outdated,” “cringy,” and even “problematic.” This emerged from the fact that older adults would maintain the use of terminology that had been forgone by younger speakers, and in some instances this terminology was understood to be problematic. Thus, when these terms were continued to be used by older adults, younger community members would negatively evaluate the older speakers as problematic or cringy. Second, younger speakers were stereotyped as creating language that was overly complicated and being militant about its use. This cultural generational tension was recognized by both older and younger people.

#### 5.5.1 Older trans adults as “cringy, outdated” speakers

Younger interview participants who had been involved in community spaces with older trans individuals noted that shared intergenerational spaces presented some linguistic struggles. For example, many younger participants expressed frustration with older trans adults, particularly when older trans
adults did not take up terminology that was currently in use among younger trans communities. Often, one point of tension was that older community members retained the use of linguistic forms that were more common when they were younger, but which had since become less common within trans spaces, such as the term “transsexual.” When younger participants expressed negative evaluations of older community members, they described older trans people’s language practices as: “cringy,” “outdated,” “uncomfortable,” and even “offensive.” These patterns align with broader societal language ideologies about language use by older adults, drawing on a figure of an “outdated” older adult.

In Interview 3, Percy, a 20-year-old, white transguy addressed his perception of the language of older trans adults. This interview consisted of participants who were all in their twenties, all of whom he knew from a university campus trans group, and likely facilitated Percy’s ability to openly critique the language of older trans adults. Percy described the experience of organizing events for his university LGBTQ+ organization. During his leadership in this organization, he would invite outside speakers to present to the organization and worked to build connections with community trans groups made up of primarily older adults. When connecting with older trans adults, he was aware of the possible reactions of other college students. For instance, he was aware that sometimes these older trans adults would use language that made college students “uncomfortable:”

Example 5.1: “tends to make college students uncomfortable”
Percy (he/him, 20 years old)- Interview 3
1 like older trans people who use a lot of language in reference to their identities
2 that tends to make college students feel uncomfortable?
3 like they’ll say like transsexual um
4 or they’ll talk a lot about how like
if you aren't medically transitioning and you don't have like xyz surgeries
then you aren't really *trans*.

Here, Percy points to terms like “transsexual” (line 3) that “older trans people” (line 1) use that “tends to make college students feel uncomfortable” (line 2). By referring to the discomfort felt by college students, he momentarily distances himself from this negative affective response, even though throughout the interview Percy has talked about his experience as a college student. Percy ties older trans adults’ use of “transsexual” to conceptions of trans identity that assume a medical transition (lines 4-6). In other words, Percy posits that students feel this discomfort not just with specific terms used by older trans adults but the way those terms are tied to exclusionary understandings of gender. While there are trans people of all ages who take up these transnormative narratives (Konnelly 2022), Percy associates them with the language practices of older trans adults.

In Interview 14, Pickles, a 43-year-old, white, nonbinary person shares evaluations of trans elders’ language that mirror some of Percy’s comments:

**Example 5.2: “Words that are kind of cringy”**

*Pickles (they/them, 43 years old)- Interview 14*

1. trans *elders* use still use words like *transsexual* *transvestite*?
2. um words that sort of are you know kind of *cringy* a little bit like
3. **you know- or that like- people in younger generations think**
4. *are like oof that that's outdated or cringy*.
5. but these are the words that they still use to *identify*?

Like Percy, Pickles points to terms such as “transsexual” and “transvestite” (line 1), and they evaluate these as “cringy” (line 2). Pickles then reframes this evaluation as that of “people in younger generations” who “think like that’s outdated or cringy” (line 3-4). By doing this, Pickles distances themself from that evaluation by framing it as a critique that they have heard rather than one they
are necessarily aligned with, potentially distancing themself from those that make that critique, but also giving it greater authority, as others in fact also think this.

What is interesting is that Pickles echoes the critiques of “trans elders” that other younger participants point to, but there are contexts in which Pickles, as a 43-year-old and leader in some trans spaces in South Carolina, might themselves be perceived as a “trans elder.” In fact, when Pickles and I met, they were the oldest nonbinary person that I knew, and I oriented to them as a model of nonbinary adulthood. In this moment, Pickles is situating themselves as neither a typical “trans elder” (line 1) nor a person “in [a] younger generation” (line 3). While I might understand them to be a “trans elder,” they do not necessarily understand themself in the same way, as they position themself as outside of the group of “trans elders” that they are critiquing. Both Percy and Pickles’ descriptions of “trans elders” and their language practices produce a characterological figure of an outdated older language user. In doing so, they draw on and reproduce stereotypes about the language use of older adults that circulate within cisgender communities as well.

5.5.2 Younger speakers as complicated and militant

Negative evaluations of trans youth’s language practices reinforced the stereotype of the language practices of younger trans people as being overly complicated and enforced through militancy about correct language use. For example, Elias, a 20-year-old, Latino, trans masculine person, describes critiques he has seen of other young people’s language. In this interview, he is talking with a group of four other participants in their twenties and thirties. They are addressing tensions around the language that has recently emerged to describe
very specific experiences of gender. The group is talking about this new language developing primarily within online communities of younger speakers. Here, Elias voices the critique that he has seen and then adds his own evaluation of young people’s attitudes towards those who aren’t as aware of terminology:

Example 5.3: “We create such a clunky language”
Elias (he/him, 20 years old)- Interview 8

I’ve seen this critique. I’ve seen this critique. Just with like people who critique overly specific genders which like there’s nothing really wrong with that to the point where like we: create such a clunky language sometimes
that people who just came into the community get super confused and alienated?
I’ve seen that before
and some people also will like be jerks
and make like a moral um like judgments on people who don’t know terms as well.

Elias notes that the proliferation of new terminology is sometimes seen by others as “clunky” (line 4) and that when people come into the community they are “confused and alienated” (line 5) by such specific terminology. Using the first-person pronoun (“we create such a clunky language,” line 4), he positions himself as a member of the critiqued group (i.e., younger trans people). In fact, elsewhere in the interview he affirms how much he enjoys coming up with and exploring the wide array of “micro labels” for very specific gender identities. Yet as he continues, his footing shifts as he voices his own critical stance, describing those who “make. . . a moral. . . judgment on people who don’t know terms as well” (line 8) as “jerks” (line 7). For him, the clunky language itself is not the problem; rather, it is the way in which younger trans people react to others who do not have the same access to this language.

While Elias was a younger trans person voicing this critique of other younger trans people, older participants echoed this sentiment. In an interview
with four participants of varying ages, Kae, a 52-year-old, white trans woman, talked about the reactions of younger community members when older community members were not familiar with certain terminology. Kae characterizes an instance in which older community members expressed displeasure over the use of certain terms (e.g., the reclamation of terminology by younger community members that older community members experienced as disparaging slurs). Following her describing this conflict, I asked how the younger community members she was interacting with reacted to the older community members’ desire to not use certain words.

Example 5.4: “The[y] go from calm to nuclear”
Kae (she/her, 52 years old)- Interview 7
1 oh:: gosh I- I’ve seen them go from you know-
2 calm to nuclear reaction right off the bat.
3 I mean um when- when- when an older person of the- the older generation is like
4 you know we don’t like that term.
5 we don’t like those terms.

Like Elias, Kae describes young people (“them,” line 1) as militant about knowing the correct terminology as well as aggressively judgmental when members of the “older generation” (line 3) others are not as up to date. Yet rather than merely being “jerks,” as Elias described them, Kae suggests that they display extreme anger: “[they] go from. . . calm to nuclear reaction right off the bat” (lines 1-2).

In fact, both Elias and Kae point to the fact that it is not necessarily the disagreement about language itself that is the point of tension between younger and older community members; rather, it is the militancy with which younger generations are perceived to orient to “correct” language use. In Transgender History, Susan Stryker (2008) defines the term “tranny,” noting that “there is a
strong generational difference of opinion about the use of the word, with older trans people often still preferring to use it – albeit no longer in public discourse, and usually out of the earshot of censorious younger people” (p. 35).

Consequently, negative stereotypes of younger trans individuals focus on this figure of a rude, hypercritical language user.

5.6 Intergenerational Understanding

Despite the circulation and uptake of negative stereotypes about both younger and older participants, participants of all ages expressed a desire for mutual understanding between both groups. First, older people saw young people as innovators who had broken out of the mold. Various older participants claimed to try their best to speak like younger people: they enrolled in classes to learn the language of young people even if it was hard, and they asked for the help of younger participants in the interviews. This is contrary to mainstream discourses that portray older people as bemoaning the language of young people. Second, even if younger people may sometimes gripe about older people’s language, some look up to older people’s wisdom gained from past experiences, and some understand that older people’s language reflects historical changes in access for trans people.

5.6.1 Older participants’ positive orientation to young participants

When participants took positive stances toward trans youth language, they focused on the social advances that young people have made for trans identities. Trans youth were described as “pioneers,” who are “more accepting [than older generations].” Others noted that trans youth are “changing the world and changing terminology” and working to “broaden horizons.” Overall, the figure of an inclusive young language activist was prominent in the descriptions
offered by my participants. For example, Pickles, a 43-year-old, white, nonbinary and trans person, describes how they feel when they hear young people talk about gender. At this point in the interview, Pickles and the other participant, Irvin, had been talking about the way that language within trans communities had changed over time. After talking about things that they found cringy about older trans adults (Example 5.2 above), they talked about what they had liked and learned from their experiences working with trans youth:

Example 5.5: “Young people are broken out of that mold”
Pickles (the/them, 43 years old)- Interview 14

1 so hearing the way that young people: talk about gender
2 they have this really cool analysis- this like
3 an- an awesome like way of critical thinking
4 that I don't think my generation was really trained to do?
5 or like conditioned to do?
6 like so young people are like- broken out of that- that mold in the script
7 that was written for them and like
8 so I find (. ) the words that they use to be uh just enlightening
9 and helping me with my own personal evolution.

Pickles uses evaluative adjectives and nouns to describe the language of “young people” in overwhelmingly positive ways: “really cool” (line 2), “awesome” (line 3), “enlightening” (line 8), and characterized by “critical thinking” (line 3). They contrast youth language practices with those of their own generation, who have not “broken out of. . . that mold in the script” (line 6), suggesting that younger people embody a liberated, critical spirit that older people have not fully achieved but that they are learning from. In fact, Pickles points to the fact that young people’s language has been crucial in their own evolution and understanding of self (line 9).

Some older participants focused on the need to keep up with changing terminology. One participant, Fredd, a 56-year-old Black trans man, describes his
experience both growing up as a young person before there was wide awareness of trans identities and now being an older person learning about the wide array of language that exists to describe trans experience.

Example 5.6: “I’m still learning”
Fredd (he/him, 56 years old)- Interview 17
1 um when I grew up at a time you were-
2 you know- they didn’t have all the letters ((LGBTQ+))
3 I- I feel like sometimes I’m learning,
4 and I ain't ashamed to say it- I'm still learning
5 because they had um in our class about three weeks ago-
6 they had the word- what was it?
7 I may say it wrong zin and zir- zin uh-
8 I might say it wrong
9 but y’all help me out because I’m old.

Fredd characterizes himself as someone who is “(still) learning” (lines 3, 4), given that when he was growing up “they didn’t have all the letters” (line 2), or a wide range of LGBTQ+ terminology to understand his identity. As a learner, he notes that he is bound to make errors, or to “say it wrong” (lines 7, 8). Despite possible shame, he emphasizes, “I ain’t ashamed” (line 4). In fact, he positively orients to the language of young people and asks young people to “help me out because I’m old” (line 9). For Fredd, building relationships with younger community members who can teach him more about the changing terminology can be a positive experience.

J5, the oldest participant I interviewed, shared a similar experience of having to first be exposed to the language of young people in a local organization. Like Fredd, who joined a class, J5 joined a local organization where she began to meet younger trans people.

Example 5.7: “but I’m old”
J5 (she/her, 69 years old)- Interview 13
1 I belong to an organization called ((name omitted))
2 and so that I- I went into it with mostly younger folks
and I worked with them as much as anything else just to get that practice
um particularly with the nonbinary () um pronouns
and um I’m still just to the place where they them theirs
are the ones I can be pretty sure I will- I will nail.
but other than that- I- I- you know-
I can do fine- but that’s the hardest one for me
but ((high pitch)) I’m old hhh.

Both Fredd and J5 remind the other participants in the interview that they are “old” as a disclaimer for moments when they may not use the “correct” terminology or pronouns. Even though J5 finds certain pronouns harder to use than others (line 8), she orients towards the experience of learning as positive and presupposes her strong aspirations to learn (“I will nail [using the correct pronouns],” line 6).

Importantly, some participants recognized themselves as both “younger” and “older” within the dichotomy that was being constructed of “trans youth” and “trans elders.” Irvin, a 34-year-old, white, nonbinary person, reflected on the fact that they, as someone who was aware of the negative evaluations and stereotypes of the “older trans curmudgeon,” still sometimes embodied that stereotype when they felt critical of younger generations’ proliferation of labels.

Example 5.8: “get off my lawn, what are all those labels?”
Irvin (they/them, 34 years old)- Interview 14

and so like- I have to be intentional about () not being like-
the grumpy old man who's like ((high pitch)) get off my lawn what are all these labels?
like there's- there is the- there has definitely been a part of me at times
that I am- am still working on honestly.
but the people who I've learned the most about gender from are definitely younger people.
and the people who push me to grow the most are younger people.
Irvin recognizes that, even though they may be understood as young in terms of their chronological age, they nevertheless have the urge in some instances to take on these stereotypical attitudes of older trans adults. They voice the stereotypical “curmudgeon” who rails at young people to “get off my lawn, what are all those labels?” (line 2). They note that avoiding falling into these attitudes is something that they must be “intentional” (line 1) about and that it is something that they are “working on” (line 4). They go on to say, however, that it is young trans people who have pushed them most to learn have been younger trans people (line 5-6).

Thus, Irvin is one example of how trans temporalities shape evaluations of language. As a 34-year-old, Irvin in some instances occupies the space of the stereotypical curmudgeonly trans elder. This is possibly related to Irvin’s social positioning within trans communities in South Carolina, as they are a leader of a regional trans organization and are likely seen as a “trans elder” not only by trans youth who access their programs, but also by trans adults who are newer to trans communities and looking for support. While they have a relatively young chronological age at 34, they find themselves positioned within trans communities as a person with expertise and years of experience being publicly out. In their advocacy role, Irvin has connected with trans youth who have pushed them to challenge their own understandings of gender and language (lines 5-6). This recognition allows for a respect for the innovations of trans youth language and demonstrated an orientation towards a desire for mutual understanding of intergeneration language practices.

Overall, when reflecting on their experiences with language, the older interviewees such as Pickles, Irvin, Fredd, and J5, expressed a respect for new
language as well as a desire to learn it. Participating in classes, attending community events, and seeking out other interactions with trans youth were some ways in which older trans adults were able to expose themselves to new language, such as new pronoun forms. Some of the older participants recognized that due to their own positionality as older trans adults, they did sometimes have experiences of feeling curmudgeonly about language change, but that overall, trans youth’s perspectives on gender and language were progressive and beneficial\textsuperscript{15}. There remained a tension, however, between the openness to learning that these older trans adults expressed and the stereotype of the critical trans youth.

5.6.2 Younger participants’ positive orientation to older participants

Throughout the interviews, some younger participants recognized how older trans people were “role models” who “paved the way” for trans people of following generations. In Interview 17, Daniel, a 22-year-old, white, nonbinary trans-masc person, was by far the youngest participant; the three other participants were 37, 42, and 56. I asked the group what, if any, changes in language they had witnessed within trans communities. The three older group members shared their ideas at length, and I eventually asked Daniel if he had any thoughts, to which he responded, “I guess I’m probably the worst person to ask about the changes because I’m the youngest one here.” But he started by reflecting on the new language developed by younger community members

\textsuperscript{15} It is possible that older participants expressed these positive views of young trans people particularly while orienting to me, whom they may have seen as young and progressive, or to other younger participants.
saying, “my age range is probably like the- the- the newest pioneers.” He then outlined the things that “queer elders” can teach his generation:

Example 5.9: “There’s so much our queer elders can teach the younger people”
Daniel (he/him, 22 years old)- Interview 17

Daniel positions himself as a one of the “younger people” (line 5), saying that older trans people know many things that “we [younger people] just don’t know about” (line 6). In this discussion, Daniel points to many experiences that trans elders have had that might have positive impacts for younger trans people. He articulates that intergenerational connections between younger and older transgender community members would be beneficial for younger trans people in order to learn about the experiences of older generations. Daniel notes that trans elders have much that they teach younger community members, because many younger people have not had to ever “directly fight” (line 7). The desire for this kind of intergenerational connection is not unique to Daniel; many other young participants reflected on the desire to build these connections with older trans adults.

Some younger participants also demonstrated understanding about historical contexts that have shaped older trans people’s language use. For example, Percy, a 20-year-old, white trans guy, shifts his evaluations of older trans people’s language use throughout the interview. Early in the interview,
Percy was critical of older trans community members’ language practices for “mak[ing] college students uncomfortable” (Example 5.1). Later in the interview, however, he reflects on his own earlier evaluations. He tells the story of interacting with an older trans woman whose language he finds outdated. Rather than rejecting her language use outright, however, he grapples with the fact that her experiences likely shaped the language she chooses to use for herself:

Example 5.10: “That’s not my experience, but that’s her experience”
Percy (he/him, 21 years old)- Interview 3
1 I need to recognize that like the resources and the community
2 and like the fact that language is evolving
3 and like that is the vocabulary that she had when
4 she was coming to terms with it
5 and~like~when~she~was~finding~her~identity
6 and like that’s the language that gave her a safe space and a
7 commu:ni:ty and people to connect to:::
8 and like that’s not my experience but like that’s her experience.
9 so like that’s okay.
10 and like we can have those different like experiences with that
11 same language at~the~same~time
12 it’s like- that was something that like- I kind of had to recognize?

First, Percy begins by correcting his earlier stances, saying that he “needs to recognize…the fact that language is evolving” (lines 1-2). He points to both the changes in material resources for trans communities as well linguistic resources, noting that older trans adults are utilizing the terminology that they had access to. While he does not consider this language appropriate to use, he admits its importance: this was the language that this person had access to when she was first coming out (line 3-4), and it is a language that “gave her a safe space” (line 5). Percy recognizes that different trans people of different generations have different experiences with language (line 6). He acknowledges the multiplicity of experiences with language with within trans communities and that “we can have those different experiences with that same language” (line 8).
Similar to how Irvin (Example 5.8) was aware of the moments in which they felt as if they are embodying the stereotype of the older, cringy, trans adult, Percy notes that he would often use terminology associated with the stereotype of “a young trans person,” one who is preoccupied with gatekeeping or angry about certain types of language use. Percy notes he “had to recognize” (line 9) the fact that this evaluation of older trans adults’ language was not taking into account their experiences as trans people in other time periods, where there were fewer resources available. Like Irvin, who is “still working” on understanding trans youth language, Percy also pushes back against his first normative response to intergenerational language difference. In the end, Percy chooses to recognize the fact that language will shift overtime and that multiple understandings of language can coexist within a trans community (line 8).

5.7 Conclusion

The trans participants in these interviews took many positive and negative evaluative stances toward different generational linguistic practices. On the one hand, younger trans people were seen as pioneers who were pushing forward new understandings of gender through language change, while simultaneously evaluated as creating too clunky of a trans lexicon and being too prescriptive about the correct and appropriate uses of this new terminology. On the other hand, older community members were described by younger community members as lacking a nuanced understanding of language and gender, and often continuing to use “outdated” and “problematic” terminology. Although many younger interviewees were critical of older community members, there was also a constant reminder of the work and struggle that older community members had experienced and the lived knowledge that younger
people should respect and value. These stances towards older and younger
generations mirror generational divides in non-trans communities that young
people are innovators of new terminology and older language users are
curmudgeons who are behind the times. Participants also recognized within
themselves moments in which they embodied a negative stereotype that was
critiqued within the groups. Specifically, Irvin and Percy reflected on when they
found themselves playing into the stereotypes of the “trans elder curmudgeon”
and the “young trans militant,” respectively.

Despite the circulation of negative evaluative stances, the participants
often took care to acknowledge the both/and: each group had positive attributes
that should be recognized, even if there were elements of differing language
norms that might be up for critique. The participants who I interviewed
frequently demonstrated a metalinguistic awareness of the shifting nature of
language around trans identities. The awareness of changing access to resources,
both material and linguistic, provided an opportunity for reflection about
intergenerational linguistic practices. The participants reflected on their own
language practices and the practices of others in their communities, in some
cases taking up existing age-based stereotypes, and in some cases adding nuance
to how these age-based stereotypes might be distinct within trans communities
due to experiences of “trans age” and changing access to community resources.
Given the experiences of “trans age” that can shape a person’s role within trans
communities, it is possible for one person to see themselves as taking up the role
of “curmudgeonly trans elder” despite having a relatively young chronological
age.
While it was a common practice to take up complaints based in widely circulating stereotypes of language and age when discussing intergenerational language practices, participants’ evaluative stances shifted when reflecting both on their own personal positionality as well as historical context of trans life. Ultimately, many of the participants recognized that language has been and will be significant for trans people, even as it continues to shift. Thus, they will continue to need to adapt to this change.
CHAPTER 6: IDEOLOGIES OF LINGUISTIC INNOVATION AND RACE

6.1 Introduction

Following broader cultural conversations in the United States about anti-Black racism, there have been efforts within LGBTQ+ communities and beyond to undo the erasure of Black queer and trans people within movements for LGBTQ+ activism. In public space, this effort has entailed educating non-Black communities about Black LGBTQ+ people who were part of early movements of queer and trans activism. For example, one white participant, Violet, pointed to the inclusion of Marsha P. Johnson on the “Google Doodle,” the central image on the Google search homepage, which often features some historical figure relevant to that day’s date, in this case June 30, 2020. Johnson, a Black trans activist, is widely recognized for being present at the Stonewall Riots in 1969, and for her work with the Gay Liberation Front and STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries). Education and awareness projects have worked at various scales — from local community education events to nationally circulating social media campaigns and documentaries — to recognize the work of Black queer and trans communities.

Despite moves to highlight the work of Black trans individuals, trans representations and communities often retain a white homogeneous perception,
both among members of such communities and to observers, primarily “through the silences in which whiteness operates” (Vidal-Ortiz, 2014, p. 264). For example, many LGBTQ+ organizations remain overwhelmingly staffed by white people (Ward, 2008), and trans students in higher education often face barriers to access presented by the norms of whiteness in education settings (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). Additionally, in online debates about transmedicalist discourses, Konnelly (2022) demonstrates how both pro- and anti-transmedicalist communities are constructed as “canonically white.” Furthermore, to understand the impact of whiteness in LGBTQ+ spaces, it is crucial not only to explore the impact of the representation and presence of white people but to understand whiteness as “an ideological and epistemological perspective that consolidates and promotes hegemony and normalization across various interlocking systems of domination and oppression to further white supremacy” (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018, pp. 134–135). These discussions about language within trans communities note that whiteness, as a perspective, controls what is understood as “normal” or “acceptable” through the white listening subject (N. Flores & Rosa, 2015).

The increased focus on trans communities of color by linguists (Calder & King, 2020; miles-hercules, 2020; Steele, 2019) reflects an effort to undo past racial erasures within scholarly representations of trans identities, as well as to highlight the practices, communities, and experiences of trans people of color. The decentering of whiteness in academic spaces echoes practices beyond it, such as activists’ efforts to recognize and uplift the work of activists of color, who have historically been erased or left out of documentation about the history of LGBTQ+ activism.
In this chapter, I turn to six interviews in which three Black participants, three white participants, and one Latinx participant deployed racialized conceptions of queer and trans linguistic innovation. Specifically, they characterized Black and white trans communities as respectively innovating distinct lexical sets. On the one hand, Black queer and trans communities were presented as originators of “queer slang,” which were often characterized as appropriated from African American English (AAE), which they typically referred to as AAVE (African American Vernacular English). On the other hand, white trans communities were described as originating an array of terms, or “micro-labels,” that described gender diversity. I suggest that these accounts of lexical origin reproduced ideologies of language and race that circulate widely in U.S. public space: Black language forms were associated with youth culture, slang, and “coolness” (Bucholtz, 1999; Chun, 2013; Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Roth-Gordon, 2016; Smitherman, 2000), and white language forms were linked with an imagined standard and normativity (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Hill, 1998, 2008; Trechter & Bucholtz, 2001).

6.2 Linguistic Appropriation

Linguistic appropriation is hardly a new topic in sociolinguistics, as researchers over the decades have been interested in what it means for certain linguistic forms to “belong” to specific communities and what happens when groups use forms that are seen as not belonging to them. Some of this work builds on the notion of crossing, which Rampton (1995) proposed based on his observations of multiracial friend groups of Afro-Caribbean, Indian, and Anglo students in England. While he did not specifically refer to crossing as a form of appropriation, as he viewed these practices as contributing to an urban
“multiracial vernacular” that was important in the creation of a youth community, his attention to the use of language that was not “straightforwardly” one’s own parallels scholarship on linguistic appropriation.

By contrast to Rampton’s view of crossing in the United Kingdom, scholars in the United States have tended to take a more critical perspective, noting how racialized linguistic appropriation contributes to the reproduction of racial stereotypes. Some of this research has noted how the use of AAE in practices of youth masculinity among white boys (Bucholtz, 1999) and Korean Americans (Chun, 2001) can implicitly link Blackness with racist tropes of hypermasculinity, even if other forms of AAE appropriation can be more blatantly racist (Ronkin & Karn, 1999). In other cases, the uptake of African American English by Asian American youth can create indexical links between AAE and urban youth identity (Reyes 2005) or else contest stereotypes of Asian masculinity (Chun 2001, Chun 2013).

Other research has suggested that the use of Spanish by whites, in what has been called Mock Spanish (Barrett, 2006; Hill, 1999; Hill, 2008), can reproduce negative stereotypes of Latinx speakers, for example, as lazy and un-American, all the while elevating the image of the white language user. However, the ways in which these different instances of mock language are taken up often depend on whose language is being mocked, who is doing the mocking, and the cultural contexts of these groups. Double-voiced parodies by in-group members, such as Mock Asian (Chun, 2004), may invoke racial stereotypes while simultaneously taking a critical stance toward them. In some cases, white speakers may be the objects of parody (Slobe, 2018), if not desire (Barrett, 1999, 2017).
Scholarship on appropriation has further demonstrated how the commodification of Black cultural and semiotic resources such as hairstyles, clothing, and language leads to the more favorable uptake of such forms when they are used by non-Black people. Linguistic analyses of appropriation within mediatized contexts have addressed the use of African American English by non-Black media figures, including characters in movies (Bucholtz & Lopez, 2011; Lopez, 2014) YouTube personalities (Chun, 2013), white emcees in rap and hip hop (Alim, 2009), and the performances of Iggy Azalea (Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015). These performances are often successful in using AAE forms to index “coolness,” co-opting forms when they bring advantages in the marketplace, yet these performances also reify negative stereotypes of Blackness. As E. Patrick Johnson writes:

“History demonstrates that cultural usurpation has been a common practice of white Americans and their relation to art forms not their own. In many instances, whites exoticize and/or fetishize blackness, what bell hooks calls ‘‘eating the other.’ Thus, when white-identified subjects perform ‘‘black’’ signifiers—normative or otherwise—the effect is always already entangled in the discourse of otherness; the historical weight of white skin privilege necessarily” (2003, p. 4).

The appropriation of forms of African American Language by white communities constitutes one form of “eat[ing] the other,” as white speakers commodify, exoticize, and value these forms, yet do not receive the pushback or criticism that Black speakers face for using the same forms. Smitherman (2000) addresses this double standard: “whites pay no dues, but reap the psychological, social, and economic benefits of a language and culture born out of a struggle and hard times” (21). Despite these critiques of processes of appropriation, Hill (2008) notes that “African American English is the single most important source for new slang (and, eventually, unmarked everyday colloquial usage)” (p. 169).
Discussions about the use, appropriation, and commodification of African American English specifically within LGBTQ+ communities are particularly salient to my participants. Forms originating in African American English are often utilized in the performance of various “gay” styles. Mann (2011b) and Kontovas (2023) address the use of African American English by white drag performers in an on-stage club performance and on RuPaul’s Drag Race, respectively. Both analyses demonstrate the ways in which white drag queens utilize African American English forms as part of drag community membership (cf. Barrett, 1999): Suzanne, a white drag queen, uses AAE to situate herself as a member of a predominately African American cast (Mann 2011), and the white drag queens on RuPaul’s Drag Race use AAE to develop rapport with other queens on the show (Kontovas 2023). These performances draw on stereotypes of Black women’s speech, particularly “sassiness,” and demonstrate one way in which AAE is utilized to the benefit of white queens in commodified performances, such as on a popular TV show. Further, Ilbury’s (2020) study of gay men on Twitter further explores the ways in which gay men draw on stereotypes of Black womanhood to index “fierceness” or “sassiness” in online media.

While scholars have long been interested in tracing this process of crossing, borrowing, and appropriation, it is only in the past eight years that there has been salient mainstream discussion about appropriation within the United States, suggesting an increasing flow of discourse between scholarly and popular critiques of appropriation practices (Chun, 2021, 2022). The growing public awareness of “cultural appropriation” is reflected in the increase in Google searches for the term, as tracked by Google Trends:
Popular discussions of cultural appropriation range from addressing the use of indigenous styles of dress as costumes and sports team mascots, to critiques of white people in the U.S. wearing clothing or hairstyles that are not from their cultural heritage (e.g., dreadlocks, saris). However, a growing contingent of discussions about cultural appropriation focus on elements of linguistic appropriation, such as the use of African American English by white Americans.

The growing cultural awareness of AAE can be seen in the Google trends graph below, which depicts the relative number of searches of a lexical string over time. (It should be noted that AAE is often referred to as “AAVE” in contemporary U.S. public space, although this label, once widely used by academics, has sometimes been replaced by scholars with African American English, African American Language, and Black Language (King, 2020).
Unlike the trend graph of “cultural appropriation,” which shows interest beginning to rise around 2015, Google search trends for the term “AAVE” shows a large increase following 2020. This greater awareness of African American English and commentary on linguistic appropriation is likely happening in tandem with the Black Lives Matter Movement and broader critiques of anti-Black racism, which garnered increased public attention following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. Further, this increase may have been shaped by the rise in popularity of the online communities such as Black Twitter (Smalls, 2018) and TikTok, in which conversations about appropriation have been prominent (Ayanna, 2021). Reflecting popular discourses generally, conversations about linguistic appropriation have become salient within queer and trans communities. In some cases, Black queer people have educated their non-Black counterparts about AAE-origin linguistic forms (e.g., creating educational YouTube or TikTok videos) that have sometimes undergone “indexical bleaching” (Bucholtz, 2010; Squires, 2014) as a racially unmarked “queer language.”

Over the 20 interviews I conducted, explicit discussion about issues of race, racism, and appropriation emerged in six of the interviews, suggesting that race was felt to be a relevant topic for only a small proportion, at least when being interviewed by me, a white trans researcher. During the interviews, I asked questions about disputes and debates about language within trans communities, which often elicited discussion about in-group debates about terminology, some related to age, as discussed in the previous chapter, and in some instances, issues of race and appropriation were brought up. In some instances, reflections on race
and racism emerged in relation to personal experiences of Black and Latinx participants, as well as some reflections on privilege by white participants.

6.3 Race in South Carolina

A brief description of the racial demographics of South Carolina helps to situate my interviews and participants. In the interviews, discourses of race most commonly addressed Blackness and whiteness, though other racial and ethnic identities were sometimes brought up, typically by people talking about their personal experiences (e.g., a Brazilian participant describing their experiences as a Latinx person). Racial discourses reflected ideologies of race in the United States, and in the South particularly, which often conceptualize race along a Black/white binary (Pereat, 1998). While the U.S. South is home to communities of other racialized minorities, histories of slavery, segregation, and anti-Black racism in the South make this racialized binary highly salient. But it also likely reflected in the experiences of my participants, who reside in a state where the majority of residents are either white or Black. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, out of a population of five million in South Carolina, 63.4% identified their race as white alone and 25.0% as Black alone. Other racial groups were significantly smaller, with 1.8% identified as Asian alone; 0.5% American Indian and Alaska Native alone; and 5.8% two or more races. Additionally, 6.9% of the South Carolina population identified their ethnicity as Hispanic/Latino. Although these categories cannot capture the complexity of racial identities, they give a general sense of why categories of Blackness and whiteness might be salient for the participants in my interviews.

Trans experiences may also be shaped by the specific racial demographics of trans communities. Interestingly, there is a smaller white trans population and
larger Black trans population in South Carolina relative to how these two racial populations are represented among the general adult population in the state, according to a 2016 Williams Institute Report on Race and Ethnicity of Adults Who Identify as Transgender in The United States (A. R. Flores, Brown, et al., 2016).

Table 6.1 Race and Gender Population in South Carolina

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Adult General Population</th>
<th>Transgender-Identified Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American or Black, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Race or Ethnicity</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Collecting demographic data about transgender populations remains difficult due to continued stigma regarding being out as trans and survey questions that inadequately offer gender options for transgender and nonbinary people. However, these figures can give a sense of the general distribution of trans people across various racial categories in South Carolina.

In terms of my participants, as outlined in Chapter 3, the 41 interviewees identified their race in an open-ended survey. In this survey, 27 (65%) labeled their race as white or Caucasian, 8 (19%) as Black or African American, 3 (7%) Hispanic or Latinx, 1 (2%) Asian American, 2 (4%) bi-racial or multi-racial. This general distribution is roughly representative of the demographics of South Carolina overall, although Black participants are underrepresented in comparison to other demographics in my participant sample, which is a

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16 The “Adult General Population” data represented here generally aligns with the data presented by the U.S. Census, however, given the different collection years as well as the distinct racial categorizations used by the U.S. Census and the Williams Institute Report, each data set reports slightly different percentages of racial demographics within the state of South Carolina.
limitation of this data. However, in an effort to attend to the experiences of Black trans people, who are historically underrepresented in trans linguistic work and in my participant pool, in this chapter I pay particular attention to the contributions of Black trans participants throughout the interviews. I analyze reflections from three Black participants, three white participants, and one Latino participant across six interviews:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Int #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Makia</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>Transsexual, female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Black, Afro-Caribbean</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamau</td>
<td>they/he</td>
<td>Transmasculine</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fredd</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rickie</td>
<td>he/him and they/them</td>
<td>nonbinary, genderfluid</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>transgender woman</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemary</td>
<td>they/them</td>
<td>nonbinary, trans</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elias</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>nonbinary, trans, genderqueer</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Latino/Brasilian</td>
<td>3,8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 6.4 Black Communities as Innovators of “Queer Slang”

In this section, I illustrate how both white and Black participants pointed to Black queer and trans people as innovators of “queer slang,” reproducing hegemonic ideologies of language and race that circulated widely in U.S. public space. Participants’ reflections demonstrated a critical awareness of the process of language borrowing and appropriation, yet they continued to tie Black language forms to a casual register of “slang” that was associated with youth, casualness, coolness, and ephemerality.

Various participants characterized how language moved through various communities and traced the origins of certain linguistic forms back to Black
communities. One particular example of this is when Rickie, a white, nonbinary, trans person, tracked the origins of queer linguistic practices to Black communities, specifically Black gay and Black ballroom communities, as the root of words that have since moved outside of those communities. This interview included five participants: one Black participant, three white participants, one Latinx participant, and me, a white interviewer. The conversation had begun by focusing on various identity labels that participants used to describe themselves, and some participants discussed the terms *butch* and *femme*. Two participants, Elias and Rickie, described seeing those terms taken up outside of queer communities in ways that they felt they terms were misused. I followed up by asking if there were other terms that they felt were misused when taken up outside of queer communities. Rickie, who is white, responds:

**Example 6.1: “a lot that’s been removed from its original context”**

Rickie- he/they (Interview 8)

1 Rickie: words specific to like gender and sexuality?
2 because there’s a lot of (,) there’s a lot that’s removed from the gay community
3 in particularly like the Black gay community hhh
4 that gets thrown into mainstream like
5 and then used- and then used to death on Twitter: hhh.
6 it’s like no::: that’s not what these things- and a lot of it’s like from- some of it’s from ballroom culture in particular
7 I think a lot of that’s been removed from its original context.

Here, Rickie traces where language comes from and how it moves. They address the ways in which language travels through various marginalized communities into the “mainstream.” In this case, the term “mainstream” is likely referencing a move into predominantly non-queer, white spaces, and online spaces such as Twitter (line 5). Their explanation gives a sense of how categories are imagined, with language moving in a trajectory from one group to another:
Rickie narrates the trajectory that certain linguistic forms take. They begin by noting that many words to talk about gender and sexuality originate in gay communities. However, they immediately respecify (line 3), noting these forms emerge and are used within Black gay communities and the Ballroom scene (line 7). While they point to the origin of these linguistic forms within Black gay communities, it is from the broader, imagined, “gay community” that this language is then “thrown into [the] mainstream” (line 5), or taken up by non-queer communities. Rickie links the temporal steps from mainstream usage to eventual overuse within online communities such as Twitter.

Whereas Rickie primarily focused on how language from gay communities was taken into the “mainstream” and then “used to death” (line 5), or overused, other participants were primarily focused on the appropriation of African American English by white people within queer communities. In one interview, two participants, Rosemary (they/them), a white nonbinary transmasculine person, and Jane (she/her), a white trans woman, discuss the “co-option” of “AAVE slang” or “Black slang” within queer communities. The conversation had moved to a discussion of words used within queer communities that the participants didn’t like, such as slurs. I asked the participants if there were any other terms that they felt that people within queer
communities should not use, to which Rosemary responded, “any co-option of AAVE slang.”

**Example 6.2: “a huge problem with Black slang being co-opted”**

Rosemary (they/them) and Jane (she/her) - Interview 2

1 Rosemary: for me: it’s like um any co-option of like uh AAVE slang?
2 which is something that I:
3 having been in some sort of queer community since I was like eleven or twelve?
4 have encountered so much that was part of my vocabulary?
5 and then um um also- being super- trying to be the best person I can be: in terms of um supporting Black liberation.
6 it’s like you don’t- like you: have been saying these words that are just like Black slang that has been taken and worked by all- uh often like white cis gay people?
7 um and other people.
8 and it just becomes like queer slang?
9 but I don't think it's queer slang as more of it's like Black slang or Black queer slang.
10 so I’ve been like actively reworking all these different like slang terms that are like just like things like sis (.) quee:n
11 like all of those terms that I don’t- I don’t want to be part of my vocabulary anymore
12 because I don't think that that's my community to be using those terms for.
13 so that’s one thing that I’m uncomfortable-
14 and I see a to::n of like white queer people- white trans people u:se um that-
15 I don't know- either have not had that reckoning yet are just ignoring it.
16 Jane: oh yeah, I definitely agree with that like-
17 that’s definitely a huge problem of like Black slang and like Black queer slang being co-opted by like white people::
18 especially like- you know- like you said- like white cis gays there's been like a lot of appropriation.
19 and in general a lot of like erasure of like um like the history of like uh people of color and Black people::
20 like within that movement.

Both Rosemary and Jane recognize that white queer people use language that is from Black queer communities, and both view it as a moral problem, calling it
“co-option.” Rosemary details how they have been a participant in “queer community” for many years (line 3) and have witnessed the use of African American English linguistic forms by white queer and trans people within those communities (line 6 and 14). They further note that “it [AAVE] just becomes like queer slang” (line 8). By using the unmarked “queer slang,” they trace the shift from “Black queer slang” (line 9) to being used by white and other non-Black queer people. However, Rosemary disputes the legitimacy of this shift in linguistic ownership, saying “I don't think it's queer slang as more of it’s like, Black slang or Black queer slang” (line 9), suggesting that these forms of language do not belong to queer communities broadly but to Black queer communities specifically.

Further, Rosemary acknowledges that they had themselves, at one point in their life, used various linguistic forms that they now recognize as coming from Black communities, but they have since worked to remove them from their vocabulary (line 10). As a white person, Rosemary situates themself as not licensed to use terms originating in African American queer communities, noting, “I don’t think that’s my community to be using those terms for” (line 12). Their claim reflects an ideology of racial linguistic ownership and use that prioritizes the racial community of origin.

While Rosemary grounds their objection to linguistic appropriation in terms of an ideology of linguistic ownership, Jane argues that it is problematic because of the racial hierarchies that are reflected and reproduced. Jane builds on Rosemary’s stance, echoing their words that Black language had been “co-opted” (line 1 and line 17), which suggests that it had been taken without permission and used in a way that it was not originally meant to be used. Jane then also ties
in broader processes of erasure to why this specific progression of linguistic appropriation from Black queer communities is so contested; they recognize that there has been an “erasure of...the history of ...people of color and Black people like within that movement” (lines 20-21). Recognition of historical figures and education about processes of linguistic appropriation has been an increasing strategy within white communities to, as Rosemary says, “support Black liberation” (line 5).

White participants Rickie, Rosemary, and Jane all demonstrate awareness of the appropriation of African American English by white queer communities (Example 6.2), and by white cis and “mainstream” communities more generally (Example 6.1). They each point to issues with this process: that language is removed from its original context, that it is used by people outside the community of linguistic origin, and that it leads to the erasure of queer and trans people of color. In Interview 19, Makia, a Black trans woman, offers another reason to see it as a problem—there is a racist double standard according to which white youth are cool, but Black people are told not to use it. In this one-on-one interview, Makia and I discussed at length issues of racism in queer communities as well as processes of appropriation. Here, she discusses the impact of the appropriation of AAE, specifically what happens when AAE is tied to “youth” identities and “coolness”:

Example 6.3: “AAVE is now seen as like white youth culture”
Makia (she/her)- Interview 19
1  Makia: and the way that it circulates as this like curr-
2    and Toni Morrison wrote a lot about this in Playing In The Dark
3    about like how Blackness is arbiter of like coo::l.
4    and like um- in so like the way that Black trans and queer AAVE is like seen as a currency for like cool in youth
[lines removed where Makia talks about AAVE on social media]
and there was like a really interesting tweet that I saw the other day where someone mentioned like how they was- like someone- like they are a Black queer person and like was told by someone

**like you need to grow up and like stop using like like youth slang.**

while like they were just like engaging in their normal like speech practices?

because too many folks now- dominant society-

**like Black queer and trans AAVE is now seen as like, white youth culture.**

so yeah it's a lot.

Drawing on the work of Toni Morrison, Makia describes how AAVE has become “currency for cool” (line 4). She then goes on to describe an example of how lack of awareness about African American linguistic practices in the mainstream leads to Black people’s own variety being dismissed as unprofessional or simply “youth slang” (lines 11-15). For Makia, it is crucial that white queer and trans communities recognize the impact that linguistic appropriation has as forms of African American English are seen as valuable “currency” for white queer people yet are criticized when used by Black people.

**6.5 Lexical Innovation and Gatekeeping in White Trans Communities**

In contrast to the characterization of slang as originating in Black communities, new terminology, or “micro labels,” for gender identities tended to be described in interviews as created and used as well as debated online primarily by white trans people and communities. Interestingly, even though these terms were understood to be linguistic innovations, they were not talked about as “slang.” The examples in section 6.4 demonstrated how interviewees traced the origins of various aspects of trans language to Black communities, however, when it came to discussions of the development of new gender labels
and maintaining the borders of the distinctions between these identities, these
discussions were associated with white trans communities.

Even when the innovations of new gender terminology by white
communities were characterized by some participants as confusing or
unnecessary, they were still generally understood as needing to be learned or
understood. For example, in Interview 17, Fredd, a Black trans man in his 50s,
described his experience with being exposed to new terminology to talk about
LGBTQ+ identities. As explored in Chapter 5 (Example 5.6), Fredd demonstrated
a desire to learn new terminology through taking classes and being involved in
community-based projects at a local university. During this discussion, he joked
that other Black queer and trans people would react to new terminology by
wondering “why [white kids] keep adding letters?”

Example 6.4: “Why they keep adding letters?”
Fredd (he/him)- Interview 17
1 Fredd they be like what is these white kids keep doing
2 why they keep adding letters?

Fredd uses elements of AAE (habitual be, verb neutralization, auxiliary absence)
to voice other Black community members (“they be like,” “what is these white
kids,” and “why they keep”), who are regularly confused by the new
terminology of “white kids,” thus distinguishing himself from them, not only in
term of age but also race; he specifically links the proliferation of new “letters”
(added to the initialism LGBT such as versions like LGBTQIAAP) within white
queer youth spaces. As discussed in Chapter 5, Fredd reflected on feeling
criticized for not knowing the appropriate terminology and struggling to learn
what is considered “correct.” Fredd relates the struggle to keep up with these
linguistic developments with a joking tone about the “white kids” who “keep
adding letters,” linking the process of terminology development with white trans communities.

Elias (he/him), a Latino transmasculine person, describes his experience with observing spaces where people have created terminology for “overly specific genders” (line 1):

Example 6.5: “The spaces where I see most of this discourse running is very white”

Elias (he/him)- Interview 8
1 I’ve seen this critique ((high pitch))
2 just with like people who critique overly specific genders
3 which like there’s nothing really wrong with that
4 to the point where like we: create such a clunky language
sometimes
5 that people who just came into the community get super confused and alienated?
6 I’ve seen that before
7 and some people also will like be jerks
8 and make like a moral um like judgments on people who don’t know terms as well.
9 [lines 9-11 removed]
10 because I do have to say that:
11 the spaces where I see most of this discourse running is very white.
12 so I don't know how it's running- in like other communities that aren't white centered- but yeah.

Although Elias notes that “there is nothing wrong with new terminology for specific genders (line 2), he often notices people who act as gatekeepers when new community members do not understand terminology (line 3-4). He then concludes that the communities in which he has witnessed this type of discussion regarding new terminology have been “white centered” (lines 9-10).

Responding to Elias, Percy (he/him), a white trans man in his 20s, aligns himself with what Elias has reported about the process of gatekeeping terminology within trans spaces. He specifically notes that “I think I see it the most. . . in. . . the Twitter sphere and. . . YouTube Tumblr spaces. . . most often with younger
White trans boys [emphasis added].” These debates about who can and can’t use what identity labels are tied to online spaces and white communities, where people will “be jerks and make…a moral judgment on people who don’t know terms as well” (line 4). Elias and Percy both emphasize that white trans communities are associated with the development of new gender-referent terminology, which leads to processes of gatekeeping: white trans people then act as arbiters of who knows the proper terminology and who does not.

Finally, Makia, a Black trans woman, distanced herself from the types of practices that were assigned to white trans communities (as seen in Examples 6.5 and 6.6). Earlier in the interview, Makia was critical of the appropriative practices of white trans communities (Example 6.3). As the interview continued, she described the ways in which white trans communities were tied to gatekeeping of terminological use, a practice that she did not want to be part of:

Example 6.6: “Black trans women [are] defecting from the categorization”

Makia (she/her)- Interview 19

1. I have noticed that there is um a hypertax-hypertaxonomic impulse
2. and the technology of categorization increases um
3. every single year there’s new terms- there are more specific terms there um
4. so there’s and individuation of subjectivity I think that’s attached to that?
5. and once again- these are not um moral claims or charges
6. and I’m not saying like um- I’m not saying it’s preferable for people to operate um under some kind of like grand narrative banner
7. and not opt for more specificity- more individuation or anything like that:
8. I’m just making an observation ((high pitch))
9. but I have noticed that impulse?
10. um and I have noticed as well not just with myself but a lot of Black trans women specifically?
11. kind of um (.) defecting from the from the uh- categorization-
categorization slash taxonomy industrial complex um
12. myself included.
Makhia notes that she has observed an increase in attention to creating a taxonomy of gender identities and labels within (white) queer and trans communities (line 1). While she does not necessarily think that it a bad thing (line 5), or that trans communities should instead opt to all use one umbrella term (line 6), she points to the tendency of “micro labels” to reproduce a hyperfocus on the individual though the “individuation of subjectivity” (line 4). This echoes Zimman (2019)’s analysis of the language of self-identification and neoliberal selfhood, which recognizes that who has such agency to define the self is not evenly distributed. Makhia points to herself and to other Black trans women (line 2), who reject such a focus on “the categorization/taxonomy industrial complex” (line 11-12). By describing the practices of creating identity categories as such, she likens the practice with other systems of power and control, such as the military industrial complex and prison industrial complex.

Throughout these interviews, white trans communities were tied to power, access, and gatekeeping of terminology, which trans people of color, such as Fredd, Elias, and Makia, found complicated, exclusionary, or undesirable. Some trans participants of color, like Fredd, worked to understand the terminological innovations, while others, like Elias and Makia, separated themselves from these discussions. Ultimately, there is a shared recognition across the reflections by the trans participants of color that these conversations about language within white trans communities shape broader understandings of trans identity.

6.6 Conclusion

When race emerged as a point of discussion alongside language in the interviews, participants oriented to Black and white trans communities in
distinct ways. First, Black queer and trans communities were recognized as originating many elements of what participants understood to be current queer and trans “slang.” However, the reasons for objecting to white uses of Black-origin slang were varied. Rosemary objected to the use of language that was not one’s own, Jane viewed such acts as co-options that reproduced power relations, and Makia critiqued the racist double standard for Black as opposed to white queer users of “slang.” Second, white communities were described as innovating gender terminology and as participating in debates about who could claim certain terminology. These distinctions reflected broader ideologies of race and language: Black trans communities’ language was seen as “cool” and an element of “youth slang,” while white trans communities’ language was viewed as determining who could claim certain gender terms.

The normative status of whiteness in trans communities, as reflected in these excerpts, is a fact that Black trans interviewees encountered in their daily lives. For example, when Kamau, a Black transmasculine person, describes the experience of coming out to his mother as trans in the early 2010s, he says that her primary response was that being trans was a “white thing” (line 1):

Example 6.7: “this is a white thing”
Kamau (they/he)- Interview 20
1 Kamau but when I came out ((at college)) and I came back home Um (.). my (.). mom explicitly was just like this is a white thing.
2 and so you know we talked a lot about talked a lot about race
3 and talked a lot about gender and just the ways in which- but I think that thinking about how my mom thought that I was appropriating white culture?
4 by coming at trans is interesting:
[lines removed where Kamau talks more about his mom’s use of ‘appropriation’]
8 coming home and saying that this is how I felt
9 was something that was so: synonymous with whiteness power access (.).
Kamau highlights that transness was “so synonymous with whiteness, power, access” (line 9) that his mother did not recognize it as a possibility for him. In contrast to discussions of white appropriations of Black language in queer and trans communities, Kamau jokes that his mom thought he was “appropriating white culture” (line 3) by coming out as trans. Kamau frames this view of transness as white as stemming from representations of transness that were salient at the time, namely Chaz Bono (line 10). While there are today more diverse representations of trans people in mainstream U.S. media than in the mid 2010s, the conception of transness as a “white thing” is still prevalent for trans people of color. Thus, even if both Black and white trans communities innovate terms, broader discourses reify their unequal statues.

Within trans communities, discussions about attribution and recognition of language are increasing, leading to discourses about where forms of “trans language” come from and who should use them. In these interviews, participants pointed to Black trans communities as cultural producers of linguistic forms and grappled with the effects of these processes of appropriation. Yet debates about what words were “correct” and who could use them were understood to be structured by norms of whiteness in trans spaces, both in person and online.
CHAPTER 7: SELF-FACING AND PUBLIC-FACING LANGUAGE AND THE CREATION OF TRANS JOY

7.1 Introduction

On May 16, 2021, a coalition of transgender organizations and advocacy groups from across South Carolina coordinated a “Queer and Trans Field Day”—an event that began with a demonstration and press conference at the SC Statehouse (see Figure 7.1 below). On the steps of the statehouse, eight community members gave public statements about the impact of the anti-trans bills proposed in the South Carolina legislature that cycle. Behind the presenters, attendees held blue, pink, and white sheets, forming a large trans flag across the steps. At this event, political action and the celebration of trans lives were directly intertwined, as suggested by community organizer Ivy Hill: “That’s what we’re here to celebrate today: The beauty and resilience of trans people in South Carolina” (Ortiz, 2021).
Figure 7.1 Protestors on the South Carolina Statehouse steps (Photo by Makhia Green17)

Figure 7.2 Attendees of the field day with Archie, second from the right (Photo by Makhia Greene)

Figure 7.3 A group of queer, trans, and allied South Carolinians posing after a game of kickball (Photo by Makhia Greene)

17 The photos of the protest and field day were accessed at https://www.southcarolinaunited.org/field-day. Photos are reproduced with permission of the photographer.
After the public demonstration, the event then moved to a local park for a community festival and kickball games (Figures 7.2 and 7.3). In addition to being a unified political statement from queer and trans organizations from across the state in opposition to the bills, it was also the first time in 2021 that many queer and trans groups had met in person since the COVID-19 pandemic stopped most local groups from having in-person events. While walking around the festival, I spoke to many people who reiterated that spending time within trans community in a positive, celebratory environment was a welcome change after a year of isolation. During the festival, community members shared various LGBTQ+ flags and pins, took part in lawn games, accessed resources such as free HIV testing and a clothing swap, and ate sandwiches on the grass. Importantly, the day celebrated trans joy and community in the face of a transphobic state.

This chapter examines how the intertwined nature of personal and political stakes were reflected in and produced through community members’ ideologies of language: language was seen as both a tool for self-discovery and community connection as well as a tool for political action. In other words, many transgender individuals in South Carolina negotiated community language practices with an awareness of the multiple political and social projects that built resources for trans individuals and counter transphobic legislation across the region. Analyzing metalinguistic evaluations from group interviews, I show how trans South Carolinians primarily oriented to two distinct approaches to language and language use. On one hand, a “self-facing” approach to language centered affect, personal discovery, exploration, and a plurality of truths, while on the other hand, a “public-facing” approach to language highlighted the political goals of trans communities, attentive to the cisnormative world, and
orients to a single, unified truth of language. I argue that these two understandings of language were not incompatible, but rather offer complementary approaches for bringing about trans joy through creating space for trans individuals to utilize language for self-determination and for trans communities more broadly to move toward the political goal of trans liberation.

7.2 Trans Joy

Mainstream beliefs about trans life often hold that trans people’s lives are terrible and difficult, aligning with the sentiment that queerness and queer life must be sad, harrowing, or tragic (Bersani, 1987; Cvetkovich, 2003). There are both personally and materially challenging aspects of negotiating gender for many trans people, including a lack of access to appropriate medical care, housing, and employment, as well as higher rates of hate crimes and interpersonal violence (Grant et al., 2011). On a personal level, trans individuals often deal with dysphoria, exclusion, and personal struggles to feel at home in their own bodies. In order to combat the negative experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and anti-trans violence, much trans activism and advocacy has focused on the experiences of suffering—both personal and social—to demonstrate the real need for change to support trans communities.

The marginalization of trans bodies in South Carolina became particularly visible with the proposal of the 2016 “Bathroom Bill” (SC S. 1203/H. 3012) in the State Legislature, a highly contested piece of legislation that mirrored the “Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act,” HB2, in North Carolina. These bills, which propelled the precarity of trans people in the Carolinas to a national stage, prohibited any anti-discriminatory laws that would protect trans individuals and maintained that bathrooms should be used in alignment with one’s “biological
sex.” In other words, they permitted cisgender people to legally police trans bodies in public space based on their inaccurate attributions of a trans person’s gender (c.f. Feliciano-Santos, 2021 for a related analysis of "Karens" and everyday acts of policing). The “bathroom bills” in South Carolina in 2016 were not successful in being passed, yet legislators continued to introduce transphobic legislation over the following years.

For instance, in 2021, the worst year to date for anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in the United States, over 250 anti-LGBTQ+ bills were introduced into state legislatures across the country (Ronan, 2021), and South Carolina was no exception. The “SC Minor Child Compassion and Protection Act,” (SC H.4707) proposed to prohibit trans people under the age of 18 from receiving gender-affirming medical care, and the “Save Women’s Sports Act” (SC H.3477/S.531), which was signed into law by the governor on May 16, 2022 (SC A.193), banned trans youth from participating in school sports on the teams that align with their genders. However, in the face of this state violence, trans communities in the state moved towards creating community solidarity and celebration, as in the Queer and Trans Field Day, described above.

Another example of a turn towards trans joy in the face of institutional transphobia is the emerging focus on experiences of “gender euphoria” as opposed to “gender dysphoria.” Gender dysphoria, defined as “the distress arising from conflicts between a person’s gender identity or expression and their assigned gender/sex,” (American Psychological Association, 2015; Beischel et al., 2021) is often a required diagnosis for accessing gender affirming medical care, and has often manifested as a tool for gatekeeping a narrow understanding of trans identity (Konnelly, 2021a, 2022). On the other hand, gender euphoria is “a
distinct enjoyment or satisfaction caused by the correspondence between the 
person’s gender identity and gendered features associated with a gender other 
than the one assigned at birth” (Ashley & Ells, 2018). This understanding frames 
a trans identity as organized around experiences of gender that are affirming, 
enjoyable, and joyful. While dominant narratives and medical models of trans 
experience often assume that trans life is a burden, a shift towards positive 
expressions of gender euphoria—moments that make a person feel good in their 
body and gender—have been increasingly centered within trans communities 
(Beischel et al., 2021; Benestad, 2010).

On a community level, one example of the shifts towards celebrating trans 
life can be seen in the creation of “Trans Day of Visibility” (TDOV), an event 
founded by Rachel Crandall, a trans therapist and activist, in 2010 in order to 
provide a day for the positive celebration of trans life. This celebration was 
created to serve as a complement to “Trans Day of Remembrance” (TDOR), 
which was founded in 1999 by Gwendolyn Ann Smith to name and remember all 
the trans individuals worldwide who had been murdered globally in the 
previous year. While ‘visibility’ as a tool for change has itself been critiqued 
(Ciszek et al., 2021; Stanley, 2021), the addition of TDOV marked a move towards 
a shared focus both on the struggles and joys of trans life.

The work of awareness and somber remembrance of the violence done to 
trans people is important and meaningful for many in the trans community, yet 
as this narrative of tragedy remains the dominant one in mainstream media, it 
may sometimes hide the reality that trans people's lives are also full of joy and 
beauty. Hopeful narratives of queer identity focus on the possibilities for 
expansiveness, joy, and love within queer and trans communities (Muñoz, 2019;
Thom, 2019). This turn towards “trans joy” mirrors moves within other communities that have focused on joy, such as celebrations of “Black joy” (J. Johnson, 2015; Lu & Steele, 2019; Packnett, 2017), “brown boy joy” (Booker, 2018) and hashtags such as #blacktransjoy (Smith, 2021). For many who take up these hashtags and phrases, “joy in the face of oppression is, in fact, a form of resistance because it is rooted in embracing community, deprograming self-hatred, reclaiming humanity and owning one’s spirit” (S. Davis, 2017). Similarly, orienting to “trans joy” has been a way to celebrate trans experience, bodies, community, and life.

This balancing of both the social and political struggles of trans life with the ability to find joy is essential, because “joy in a marginalized body has always been a form of resistance entwined with the politics of queerness” (McBee, 2018). Trans joy is about both the ability to discover and claim one’s identity and the creation of a world in which trans people can live and thrive. As feminist activists have asserted, the personal is political; for trans people, whose identities and existence are often politicized, the intertwined nature of the self and the political is particularly salient. Crucially, experiences of trans joy are political, as emotions are “a form of cultural politics or world making” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 12). In this chapter, I show how trans people used language at the intersection of the personal and the political to create and reflect trans joy.

While I analyze examples from only three participants across two interviews (Table 7.1), they represent a common ideological juxtaposition that recurred across many of the interviews.
Table 7.1 Participants featured in Chapter 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Int.#</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violet</td>
<td>she/her he/him</td>
<td>nonbinary, trans</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>1, 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>he/him they/them</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elias</td>
<td>he/him</td>
<td>nonbinary, trans,</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Latino/Brasilian</td>
<td>3, 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>genderqueer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pickles</td>
<td>they/them</td>
<td>nonbinary, trans</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the analysis below, I highlight how the participants primarily oriented to two approaches to language use within trans communities: “self-facing” and “public-facing.” Rather than suggesting that these are contradictory, participants recognized how both were useful and salient for trans communities. Ultimately, both approaches to language were reflected by other interviewees as intrinsically intertwined in the creation of trans joy.

7.3 Self-facing Approach to Language

The first part of my analysis focuses on one group interview in which the group members had a rich discussion of their ideas about language. For participants in this interview, it was the second interview that they had partaken in, and all of them already knew at least one other participant, some from outside relationships and others via previous group interviews. Because of this, the participants seemed more comfortable talking with each other than interviews I had conducted where participants were less familiar with each other. I focus on this interview because the participants were helpfully explicit in their explanations, and the themes they discussed were echoed by other interviewees across many interviews. I focus on two participants: Violet (she/her, they/them or he/him), a 31-year-old, white, nonbinary/trans person, and Elias (he/him) a

18 Spelling choices of the participants has been maintained here.
20-year-old, Latino/Brasilian, nonbinary/trans/genderqueer person. I explore how they discussed the tensions that emerged around language use, especially when it came to how language was taken up both inside and outside of trans communities.

In Example 7.1, Violet articulates two of the facets of the self-facing orientation to language: that language is a part of one’s own journey (i.e., prioritizing self-discovery and self-identification), and that there is no one truth.

Example 7.1: “As many labels as there are people”
Violet (he/she/they)- Interview 8
1 and I think it’s the same with gender::
2 there’s-uh-there’s probably as many labels as there are people and experiences
3 and you can drill all the way down if you want? to
4 the point is to just to- you’re on your own personal journey.
5 get to a spot where you feel like the best version of yourself.

Unlike views of language that hold that there is a singular, knowable truth of language or one “correct” form of language, Violet points to an individuality, both in experiences of gender and labels of that experience that are all unique—where there are “as many labels as there are people and experiences” (line 1) The goal of language in this case is not to provide broad, overarching categories of identification, but rather to aid in the “personal journey” (line 4) and help each person “feel like the best version” (line 2) of themself. Violet’s focus on understanding the self through language reflects the prioritization of linguistic self-determination within trans communities more generally.

Further, the process of “drill[ing] all the way down” (line 3) and figuring out what different words mean is not just an activity for personal fulfillment; it can also be an intellectually joyful activity in and of itself. While for many trans
people, coming to find the terminology that feels correct to describe themselves is a challenging process, Violet and Elias both orient to this process as fun and fulfilling, not stressful. Elias notes that it is a “fun activity” and a “puzzle” for him:

**Example 7.2: “it’s a philosophy puzzle”**
Elias (he/him)- Interview 8

1. um- it’s like- it’s a fun activity hhh
2. for like- I feel like- for the people who really like *know* all these terms
3. and like are *into* it
4. like may- myself and Violet
5. like it’s because we’re people who enj oy delving into that sort of thing
6. and *cause* it’s like- it’s like a puzzle
7. *like* for me it’s a *philosophy puzzle*

Elias categorizes himself and Violet as “people who really like know all these terms and are like into it” (line 1). While Violet and Elias had just met for the first time at this interview, they have clearly aligned themselves with one another as both embodying a social type: “people who enjoy delving into that sort of thing” (line 3). This figure of a trans person who enjoys playing and exploring with language is contrasted elsewhere in the interview with people who “don’t care,” people who “don’t have time,” and people who are “not as online.” It is also contrasted with people (both cis and trans) who care about finding and prescribing one correct use of language, rather than taking language as an individual and personal process. Interestingly, Elias describes himself and Violet as “know[ing] all the terms” (line 2), however, despite “knowing” them, he does not then assume there is one correct way to use the terminology; he thinks of it more as “a puzzle” (line 7).
Rather than focusing on finding and articulating one correct version of trans language, Violet and Elias found joy in the exploration of language for its own sake, as part of a philosophical endeavor (which is how Violet articulated the experience in Example 7.3 below). It is through this exploration of language that they were able to tap into a sense of trans joy— that finding language that felt good was a way to articulate a true sense of self that is authentic for each individual. Talking about using language that “feels right” has often been a central way that trans people advocate for the use of gender-affirming terminology (Crowley, 2022). There was a sense of joy in the expansive possibilities of trans identity that excited Violet and Elias. The linguistic articulation of an endless array of genders was not scary or daunting, it was in fact, a move to a better trans future. Their linguistic practices reflected an understanding of the “horizon of possibility” (Muñoz, 2019), a vision of queer futures imbued with the wide range of potentialities. Although the participants in this interview rejected that there was one correct way for any trans individual to describe their gender, they acknowledged that this joyful exploration of language must be set aside in instances of political necessity.

7.4 Public-Facing Approach to Language

Although Violet and Elias described the joy in discovering language that worked for them and understanding how language works within trans communities more generally, throughout the conversation, they also oriented to a public-facing approach to language. This understanding of language focused on language as goal-oriented, with one (strategic) truth, and specific attention to the broader cis world. In the following two examples, both Violet (Example 7.3)
and Elias (Example 7.4) point to legal issues that trans communities face and how language plays a role in the fight for legal representation.

**Example 7.3: “we have to get behind words”**

**Violet (he/she/they)- Interview 8**

1. there's- there's the *philosophical* part of it
2. which I really love.
3. but then there's also the *political* angle to it where we have to
4. you know
5. *get behind words in order to build a movement and lobby*
6. and we have to- you know-
7. *get behind words to make- create safety for people.*
8. and- and you know
9. like that aspect isn't- that's- that's the part that's not fun.
10. right that's the part that's way too real.
11. um and it's very necessary and it sucks.

**Example 7.4: “Are they going to target you with this”**

**Elias (he/him)- Interview 8**

1. and it's- it's very difficult to like decide what language goes into:
   um
2. yeah into laws and such
3. because like you have to think about it.
4. *are they going to target you with this*
5. *or are they going to protect you with this?*

In Example 7.3, Violet explicitly contrasts the “philosophical part” (line 2) of language use which is self-facing and the “political angle” (line 3) which is public facing. For them, this public-facing focus of language is necessarily goal-oriented—about building power for a movement for transgender rights. Further, while Violet earlier advocated for multiple truths, here they argue that trans communities have to “get behind words” (line 5) to put forward a unified front that promotes one (strategic) truth. This approach to language is not “fun” (line 9); it is “way too real,” “very necessary,” and it “sucks” (line 11). Elias echoes a similar belief (Example 7.4) about the political strategy and agency of trans
communities in “decid[ing] what language goes into laws” (line 1), but he is additionally worried that even once this is decided on, it could still be used to harm trans communities. These worries echo broader critiques of the limits of legal protection for transgender people (Salamon, 2018; Spade, 2015; Vipond, 2015; Wagner & Crowley, 2020); Violet and Elias also recognize that linguistic inclusion does not necessarily mean actual protection from the state.

The public-facing approach to language stems from the awareness of the reality of harm and attempts at identity delegitimization targeting trans communities. Throughout the discussion, the participants reflect on how in any instance of language usage, they are attentive to the outside world and the potential audiences of that language use. They are not simply thinking of this when it gets put into law, but in any instance when non-trans people become aware of trans people and their language practices.

Example 7.5: “I worry about…the way harm could come”

Violet (he/she/they)- Interview 8

1 there’s like a part of me that wants to just like
2 you know:
3 kind of (.) stop worrying so much about what people see from the outside.
4 but like- you know-
5 you can’t be too Zen about that?
6 when there’s like violence out there right?
7 [lines omitted where Violet talks about privacy precautions they have taken on their social media]
8 you know me- being like
9 yeah- going into some discourse with other trans and nonbinary people?
10 like to me- that feels very fruitful and productive and I’m glad for it?
11 but there’s a lot of bias out there from- from cis people:
12 people- people who don’t know- from transphobic people:
13 and I would worry about- you know-
Violet is aware that having in-group community discussions about language is fun, fulfilling, and “productive” (line 12), but they worry that if outsiders see that and take it up in ways that were not intended, that harm could come. While the earlier examples point to the possibility of harm via a transphobic state, Violet is aware of the ways in which the personal and political are intermeshed. The uptake of language by any outside interlocutor, not just politicians, but also “cis people” (line 13) or “people who don’t know” (line 14), such as older family or community members, could potentially bring harm.

Despite their enjoyment in pulling apart language, Violet’s awareness of potential outcomes meant that they “can’t be too Zen about that” (line 4): in this sense, metadiscourse about language practices was imbued with a sense of responsibility for one’s community and a high degree of attunement to the implications of community-internal discourses were they to be reproduced and weaponized against trans individuals elsewhere. Although the public-facing view of language was contrasted with the self-facing view — primarily through the first being characterized as “fun” and the second as “not fun” — an orientation to joy as a political motivator still underlay the goals of the community members. They want there to be space for “fruitful and productive” discussion (line 7) but were attentive to how this language will be taken up. Crucially, political action was not separate from moving towards trans joy; in fact, the participants wanted to create safety and space for trans people to live and thrive—the ultimate orientation to trans joy.
7.5 The Personal and Political

Violet and Elias’ discussion articulated two salient approaches to language—self-facing and public-facing—for this trans community. The self-facing orientation to language offered clear examples of trans joy; it encompassed a way for trans individuals to celebrate and understand themselves. However, trans joy could be found even in more strategic uses of language that were aimed at public audiences. Both the personal, “philosophical” exploration of language and the public, “political” impact of language were seen to be both present and relevant in trans lives and in the creating the possibility for trans joy and thriving.

The awareness of the dual purposes of language are again articulated in a different interview by Pickles, a 43-year-old, white, nonbinary/trans person:

Example 7.6: “Every tool is a weapon if you hold it right”
Pickles (they/them)- Interview 14

1 while you were talking I was thinking of-
2 I- I was reminded of this- I’m going to date myself now
3 Ani deFranco hhh back in the day-
4 speaking of TERFs isn’t she a TERF now?
5 I don’t know yeah
6 but my young queer heart used to listen to Ani deFranco and there is a poem
7 I think Coming Up?
8 there's a line in it that says every tool is a weapon if you hold it right
9 that's what- that's what I think of with language
10 like language can be a tool?
11 um (.) especially~with~the~trans~community it can be a way to um
12 find your community
13 can be a way to build yourself um
14 but it can also be used as a weapon
15 so um we have to be very careful
16 it’s a powerful powerful thing.
For Pickles, language encompasses both the ability for personal understanding, “a way to build yourself” (line 11), and a “weapon” (line 12). While bringing up this lyric, they refuse to let the “TERF”19 label occupy time (lines 4-5). Instead of focusing on the possibility that Ani deFranco is opposed to trans life, Pickles centers their own interpretation of the lyrics as a way to understand trans linguistic practices— they refuse to focus on trans sadness and instead vocalize trans joy by mentioning the past fulfillment of their “young queer heart” (line 7). They reference the power and possibility that language has for both community and self-identification (line 10). However, like Violet and Elias above, Pickles is also aware of the implications of uptake, that “we have to be very careful” (line 13) about how trans language is taken up. Like many trans people, they are able to metalinguistically reflect on the importance of language in the lives of trans people, which Pickles describes through the imagery of language as both tool and weapon.

For the participants in my interviews, orienting to both of these approaches to language at the same time—in fact, moving fluidly between them for strategic purposes—was is essential. One might assume that these two approaches to language would cause an ideological tension within a community (c.f., Chun, 2017); however, within this community of trans people, they held that there may be both one politically strategic use of language as well as a plurality of terms for self-discovery. For them, language was for the individual and also for

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19 “TERF” is an acronym for “Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist”. It originally referred to a minority of people within radical feminist spaces who sought to exclude trans women from women’s spaces and movements. Now it is often used to describe people who espouse a range of transphobic views, primarily that trans women are not women and that transness is a mental illness.
the collective. They were aware that language was not just in the power of the original user, but that the uptake of the audience, and particularly that of the dominant group, needed to be considered. On one hand, participants oriented to an internal experience of language— they spent time figuring out what language felt good to them and could appropriately name their experience of gender. This use of language as crucial to the creation of trans joy; it provided a resource for trans people to explore, name, and celebrate themselves as trans people. On the other hand, the participants recognized that at some point, even self-facing uses of language might be taken up into public discourse in unintended or unexpected ways. Thus, it is essential that linguists expand our understanding of the creation of trans joy through language: it is not only about the ability to self-define, but also about creating a world that supports trans life.

7.6 Conclusion

Like many trans people, Violet and Elias were working to puzzle out the nuances of what language meant for trans individuals and communities and as well as non-community members. They recognized that language was simultaneously a fun, philosophical puzzle, a tense in-group debate, a practical tool for communicating identity, and a political intervention. While these approaches to language might seem opposing and contradictory, they encapsulate the nuance of language as an ongoing political project within trans communities. In other interviews, Pickles and Jamie articulated how the goals of trans language practices were, at once, about personal, community, and political change.

Both the self-facing and public-facing views of language were oriented towards creating a space for trans people to safely be our authentic selves, both
through self-determination and exploration and through political action that pushed for a safer world. Thus, these two approaches to language prioritized *trans joy* by envisioning a world in which trans people could truly be themselves and have flourishing lives. It is crucial to simultaneously make space for both of these theories of language in order for trans individuals to utilize the power of language for self-determination and for trans communities more broadly to move political goals forward and push for social change. Joy comes through self-realization (and finding the right language to reach it), but also, trans joy is a political goal through which trans people can build a future in which we are able to thrive. Violet, Elias, Pickles, Jamie, and other trans South Carolinians recognized how language played a role in making this future a reality. While the realities of the political landscape in the United States and in South Carolina were often challenging for trans individuals, working for a world in which trans people could both understand themselves and exist in society was ultimately a prioritization and expression of trans joy.
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

8.1 Findings

This dissertation has described a complex set of language ideologies that trans South Carolinians navigate when engaging in and talking about trans language practices. I have explored the multiple ways in which trans people justify lexical and grammatical choices as they negotiate their sociocultural positioning in the face of normative cisgender ideologies, specifically among transgender Southerners, a group that has been underrepresented in research in trans linguistics. Specifically, I investigated the language ideologies that trans participants invoked when discussing and evaluating what language is appropriate to use when talking about the trans community. My findings were situated within the current context in the United States where there has been increasing awareness of trans people and our linguistic affirmation.

Despite this increased public recognition of trans identities and experiences, mainstream discourses about trans identity continue to paint a homogenous picture of the experiences of transgender people, and consistent with this view is the assumption that there exists a consensus with respect to the “appropriate” or “correct” way to talk about trans people. I have shown, however, that in-group beliefs about language use are far from agreed-upon. Within the trans communities where I conducted my research, ideologies about language were shaped by considerations of gender, regional identity, age, and
race. In other words, social factors beyond gender shaped understandings of what it means to talk about trans identity.

One key finding of the dissertation was that regional identity and ideologies of regional language forms shape ideologies of trans language use. In Chapter 4, I addressed how the widespread narrative that trans people want to leave the U.S. South assumes that transness and Southernness are incompatible. Further, for many of the participants, there were aspects of life in the South that posed challenges, such as widespread conservative values and lack of access of trans affirming medical care. Linguistically, participants pointed to features of Southern American English, such as the gendered address terms sir and ma’am, as creating a uniquely challenging environment for trans people. For some of the participants in this dissertation, however, it was important to demonstrate how the affirmation of trans people and Southern politeness practices were not incompatible. In fact, elements of Southern American English, such as y’all, were taken up for their gender-inclusive potential in queer and progressive communities outside of the U.S. South. While much research on transgender communities has focused on trans people in metropolitan areas of the U.S. West and North, it is crucial to continue to attend to trans communities within the U.S. South, as these communities provide an important linguistic and cultural perspective.

In some cases, trans participants reproduced ideologies about language and identity that continue to circulate within broader communities in the United States. In Chapter 5, I explored how both younger and older trans participants took up ideologies about language and age that mirrored widely held cultural beliefs about language use, particularly in the invocation of the figure of a
“progressive, innovative young language user” and a “cringy, outdated older language user.” While there were some factors of trans identity that shaped the understandings of intergenerational language use, such as the importance of “trans age” in shaping each participants positionality within trans communities, broader cultural ideologies regarding language and age remained salient within these trans communities.

In Chapter 6, I addressed the reification of ideologies about linguistic innovation, race, and standardization within trans participants’ discourses about language and race. Among some of the participants, there was a growing recognition of the linguistics contributions of Black queer and trans communities as well as the appropriation of such linguistic resources by non-Black queer and trans people. However, despite the recognition of these processes, within the discussions about linguistic innovation, such as new terminology, participants reproduced racialized ideologies about linguistic innovation. The innovations of Black trans communities were typically referred to as “slang,” while innovations of white trans communities were discussed as part of a creation of a standard typology of trans identities. In these discussions, the racialized ideologies regarding whose language use was seen as “standard,” namely that of whites, continued to be reproduced within these discussions. Both of these chapters have demonstrated how broadly circulating ideologies of language and identity were taken up within transgender communities.

Finally, I have shown that in some cases, participants navigated seemingly competing ideologies about language use. In Chapter 7, I explored how trans interviewees demonstrated an attention to the use of language for both personal use as well as for strategic public use. When used for personal exploration,
participants prioritized the multiplicity of language forms and the ability to change and experiment. When using language that might be heard by non-trans people or wider public audiences, participants focused on using terms that were less likely to have negative ramifications for trans people, if the terms were to be taken up by cisgender speakers. Though these two uses of language might seem to be incompatible ideologies of language, participants moved between both. The chapter suggests that the shifting orientations to these understandings of language were in fact a strategic prioritization of trans joy. The participants understood that it was crucial to use language to create joy through personal identity discovery as well to create safe futures for trans life.

8.2 Implications for the Study of Language Ideologies

This research contributes to our understanding of trans language practices from a language-ideological lens as well as to our understanding of language ideologies from a specifically trans linguistic perspective. Importantly, in taking up a trans linguistic framework, I “depend[] on the wisdom of marginalized communities,” (Zimman, 2020, p. 15). While I attend to the contradictions, tensions, and hegemonic reproductions in the ideologies of language and gender articulated by the participants in this project, I ultimately recognize the astuteness and perception with which trans people are thinking about language use. Centering the everyday theories of language that my collaborators used to describe their own lived experiences and uses of language serves as a reminder that these understandings of language were both as complex and as partial as scholarly theories and ideologies of how language works in the world. In different moments, participants foregrounded the use of language as part of their own relationship with their inner self, as intimately entwined with regional,
generational, and racial identities, and crucially, as a tool through which trans people could describe, protect, and support trans communities. These perspectives on language reflect the uptake of various, often competing, ideologies of language, and ultimately demonstrate the creative ways trans people are using language to survive and thrive.

Further, this research contributes to sociolinguistic theory by examining language ideologies from an intersectional lens. With the uptake of intersectional approaches within language and gender studies, there has been increased attention to issues of intersectionality in the context of a person’s lived experiences at the intersection of various systems of marginalization. Emerging intersectional approaches to sociolinguistic research have attended to the production of language by people at the intersections of various identities. My work builds on this attention to intersectionality by investigating how language ideologies becomes contextualized within specific environments and how race, age, and regional identity shape the ideologies of language that are mobilized in conversations about trans language. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 demonstrate how the various language ideologies that participants invoked when evaluating language use within trans communities were shaped by participants’ own positionalities (e.g., as trans and as Southern or as trans and as an older adult), as well as intersections of ideological belief systems. This can be seen in the ways that participants’ evaluations about language use within trans communities were shaped by their racial ideologies about language innovation in Chapter 6. Understanding how speakers invoked ideologies of race and age, for example, when talking about language and gender within trans communities demonstrates the inextricable links between these various categories.
8.3 Limitations and Future Directions

This dissertation expands upon the growing area of trans linguistics that centers ethnographic analyses of trans language conducted by researchers who are also trans. Although I am a trans and nonbinary researcher, and thus considered an in-group member by many of the participants that I interviewed, my specific positionality as a white, transmasculine transplant to the South, inevitably shaped the recruitment, data collection, and analysis present in this dissertation. As I have discussed in Chapter 3, participants skewed young, white, and nonbinary or trans masculine, reflecting my own personal networks. As I have argued in this dissertation, recognition of the heterogeneity of trans communities and trans language practices is crucial in building a trans linguistic framework. Thus, future research must further attend to language ideologies within trans communities that continue to be underrepresented in linguistic research, such as trans communities of color, trans feminine people, and trans women, as well as older trans adults.

Another key area for future research is to explore how these ideologies are taken up and circulated outside of transgender communities. While looking at trans communities in the South, this project attends to current changes in progress and how the uptake, or its absence, of new forms of language are shaped by beliefs and ideologies, both about social identities and about language. This perspective is important for broader theories of language change, and future work should attend to how these ideologies of language are mobilized in discourses about trans language, both by transgender individuals in other regions as well as by cisgender people more generally.
Additionally, this dissertation has focused on face-to-face video interview conversations among transgender people from South Carolina, but in the interviews, many of the participants talked about the relevance of online communities and social media in the circulating discourses about trans language. Media discourse about trans people in some cases may reproduce ideologies that emerge within local communities, such as the ideologies expressed by participants in the interviews here, but it is possible that once discussions of trans language reach other forms of media, the language ideologies invoked may be distinct from those taken up within in-person trans communities. By looking at how debates about language take place online, both within trans communities and outside of them, we will better be able to understand how these ideologies shape the uptake and spread of new forms used to talk about language and gender.

8.4 Closing Issues

Throughout my time with trans communities in South Carolina, in both participant observation and interviews with trans Southerners, it became clear that there was not a consensus on what “trans language” is. Within the interviews, participants shared highly contested ideas about what lexical items were seen as “outdated,” what linguistic practices aligned with regional norms, what forms were appropriated from trans communities of color, and what language should be used in specific contexts. In this dissertation, I have argued that attending to localized social contexts and intersections of identity is crucial in developing a trans linguistics. As linguists attend to trans communities, we must continue to recognize the creative ways in which trans people use language
to describe our experiences, and how these forms of language are shaped within specific contexts.

As I conclude this project in 2023, the current social and political climate for transgender people in the United States is, to be honest, scary. Throughout this rise in public transphobia over the past few years, I have felt lucky to be able to stay connected to on-the-ground trans communities in South Carolina. They have made navigating the transphobia of the world a little more bearable, a reminder that I am not alone. I am grateful for the opportunity to interview such creative and insightful individuals, who are each in their own way creating space for themselves as trans people in South Carolina.

As I discussed in Chapter 7, trans people are always aware of the potential uptake of our language; the political realities of trans life are ever-present. While attending to the uptake of ideologies of language and gender outside of trans communities is important, this dissertation centers how language is working within trans communities. I hope to have contributed to a trans linguistics that “is attuned not only to oppressive language but also to agency in, through, and beyond language” (Zimman, 2020, p. 15). Ultimately, I celebrate the complex, contradictory, personal, joyful, and political ways that trans people are using and thinking about language to create better, more equitable, and more joyful trans futures.
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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

This flyer was distributed on community Facebook pages, listservs, Discord Servers, and group chats.

![Recruitment Flyer]

*Figure A.1 Recruitment Flyer*
APPENDIX B: PRE-INTERVIEW SURVEY

The pre-interview interest survey was distributed on Qualtrics and all the questions were open-ended.

1. What is your name?
2. What pronouns do you use?
3. How do you describe your gender?
4. How old are you?
5. How do you identify your race and/or ethnicity?
6. How long have you lived in South Carolina?
7. What is your email address?
8. What is your availability?
9. Feel free to add any additional scheduling information:
10. Do you want to participate in this interview with people you already know? If so, provide their names (1-2 people) below so I can schedule you together.
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Opening:
• Greet everyone
• Ask to change display name to pseudonym
• Remind them I am recording, saved to my computer
• Frame conversation, ask not to spread
• Remind about payment
• START RECORDING

Interviewee Labels
1. What labels do you use to describe your gender identify, if any?
   a. How did you come to pick that particular label over others? [coming out experience]
2. What other labels do you use to identify yourself? E.g., ethnicity, social class, etc.
3. Do you identify as transgender? Why or why not?

The trans community
1. Where did you first learn about trans identity? Where did you look for information?
2. What is your relationship like with the transgender community, online and in person?
3. What has it been like to be trans in SC for you?
4. What have your interactions been like with transgender individuals from other generations?

Trans Language
1. Do you think that language around gender has changed in the past 10 years?
   a. How do you perceive the change in the language used to talk about gender?
2. What kind of discussions about language use in the community have you seen/heard in person or online?
   a. Have you heard of disagreements about labels in the trans community? What kind? Do you think there should be agreement?
   b. Have there been disagreements/conflicts/discussions between any specific groups/parts of the community?
3. Do some gender labels bother you? Why?
a. What do you think about the term X, Y, Z? [build off terms they might have brought up, some other examples: transtrender, transsexual, singular they, neopronouns]

4. Besides labels, are there certain ways of speaking (pronunciations or turns of phrase) that people use in the trans community that are not really used in the cis community? For example "cis"?

5. What other language communities are you a part of (racial, ethnic, class, hobbies etc) and how do those communities influence your understanding of trans language?
   a. Can you predict what label someone might use based on their speech or their clothing or something else?
   b. Are you sometimes misgendered? How have you responded? Can you tell me about a specific instance?

Language/Linguistic Activism

6. What is language activism to you? Do you do it? Do you see it?
   a. Give examples?
   b. what kind of ways have you seen like, advocacy or activism around language coming out of trans communities, like what kinds of projects or movements have you either been involved with or just seeing that people do?

7. What do you think the impact of language activism has been for the trans community in broader society?
   a. what do you think the impact of like language advocacy and language activism has been for the trans community?
   b. What kinds of change should happen around language?

In the end:

1. Is there anything else you want to say about the language and the trans community? Or is there anything else I should have asked?
2. Is there anything you want to clarify or want to go back to, change what you said?
3. Would you be willing to do a follow-up interview?
4. Message me—pseudonym (fake name) you want to use & how to pay you (cashapp, venmo, paypal)

Additional Questions for Returning Interviewees

1. How do you perceive the change in the language used to talk about gender?
2. What kind of discussions about language use in the community have you seen/heard in person or online (since the last interview)?
3. Have you had any thoughts about trans language since we last talked?
4. Have you noticed any new conversations about language practices in the news/on the internet?