Enacting New Worlds of Gender: Nonbinary Speakers, Racialized Gender, and Anti-Colonialism

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Abstract and Keywords

Nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people resist normative binary gender by identifying themselves and inhabiting their bodies in ways that are less rigid and less tied to social expectations than seen in dichotomous understandings of gender. This review of nonbinary language practices considers the ways that Black nonbinary speakers use language to resist the modern Western gender binary that emerged from colonialism and slavery. Their various ways of pushing back against binary views of gender complicate theories of language, gender, and sexuality. A sociophonetics study on the variables of pitch and /s/ among both Black and white nonbinary speakers in the United States demonstrates how Black nonbinary speakers challenge colonialist legacies of racialized binary gender to create new ways of expressing gender. The chapter calls for further investigation by scholars of language, gender, and sexuality into the gender binary and the influence of race on gender expression.

Keywords: colonialism, gender binary, gender-nonconforming, intersectionality, nonbinary language practices, race, sociophonetics, United States

Introduction

This chapter seeks to illuminate the small yet growing body of research on language and nonbinary gender and contextualize it within the rise of the modern Western gender binary. My review provides a baseline of how nonbinary gender has been studied and also points to new avenues that take into account the impact of the gender binary on those whose relationship to it is conditioned by race. It is essential for language, gender, and sexuality researchers to question the gender binary in order to make room in our analyses for those who do not align themselves neatly with normative femininity or masculinity. Further, we must center the intersections of gender and sexuality with other aspects of identity such as race, socioeconomic status, and place so that our analyses are contextually situated yet open to the magnitude of potential identities and experiences that influence speech. In this way, language, gender, and sexuality studies will pave the way for-

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ward for a focus on nonbinary and gender-nonconforming individuals who remain until now at the margins of academic inquiry.

The Western gender binary as a legacy of colonization and slavery

I define the Western gender binary as the separation of gender into distinct and opposing categories of women and men as reinforced through patriarchy, a hierarchy in which men are socially positioned as more powerful and more capable than women (on categorization, see Canakis, this volume). I am specifically concerned with the Western gender binary as enacted in Western societies, particularly in Europe and North America, and in communities that have been colonized by these societies. Much of the focus in this chapter is on nonbinary people in the United States, as this is where I reside and where my research is situated. I focus on gender as it relates to social gender roles and gendered stereotypes, as well as the expectations afforded by those roles and stereotypes. What are Western conceptions of binary gender, how are they reinforced, and how do they affect contemporary realizations of gender? Answering these questions can help us understand the binary model of gender from which modern nonbinary people in Western cultures distinguish themselves. As I demonstrate throughout this chapter, this distinction is achieved in part through the strategic use of linguistic resources.

The status of the Western binary as the prevailing understanding of gender is reinforced by a contrast between middle-class whiteness and a racialized Other. According to Yen L. Espiritu (1997), “gender norms in the United States are premised upon the experiences of middle-class men and women of European origin. These Eurocentric-constructed gender norms form a backdrop of expectations for American men and women of color—expectations which racism often precludes meeting” (135). While much of society tends to expect gender roles and stereotypes to be generalized (i.e., applied to all people in the same way), this process leaves out the differing ways that gender can manifest for people of color. My analysis draws upon the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), who coined the term *intersectionality* to refer to the structural, political, and representational oppression of Black women by both white supremacy and patriarchy. In Crenshaw’s view, the experiences of Black women cannot be fully understood without deep insight into the ways that the multiple oppressions they face interact with one another. By taking an intersectional approach to the Western gender binary that considers race as well as gender, my analysis illuminates the gaps that occur when gender and sexuality are conceptualized as distinct from other marginalized identity categories. This separation leads to “gender” serving as a false generic that implicitly refers only to the gender of white subjects (see Barrett 2002 for a similar pattern in linguistic research; for discussions of intersectionality as it has—and has not—been applied in the field of linguistics, see Levon 2015; Chun and Walters, this volume; Cornelius, this volume; miles-hercules, this volume).

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I first consider the enforcement of the Western gender binary by foregrounding the erasure of Native people's gendered identities via colonization and then connect this to the imposition of the Western gender binary on slaves brought to the United States from Africa. Centering the history and experiences of Native people on colonized land is vital. As Indigenous Two-Spirit scholar Qwo-Li Driskill (2016) points out, the systematic and continued marginalization of Native struggles "even if unintentional—perpetuates a master narrative in which Native people are erased from an understanding of racial formations, Native histories are ignored, Native people are thought of as historical rather than contemporary, and homelands aren't seen as occupied by colonial powers" (78). I seek to depart from the tradition of putting Native stories on the periphery—including within language, gender, and sexuality studies—in order to forge forward in ways that better center the global histories and present-day experiences of Native people.

Through Western colonization, Native societies were violently restructured to adhere to Western binary gender systems. As Native feminist Andrea Smith (2015) argues:

> U.S. empire has always been reified by enforced heterosexuality and binary gender systems. By contrast, Native societies were not necessarily structured through binary gender systems. Rather, some of these societies had multiple genders and people did not fit rigidly into particular gender categories. *Thus, it is not surprising that the first peoples targeted for destruction in Native communities were those who did not fit into Western gender categories*.
>
> (Smith 2015: 178, my emphasis)

Since the early colonization of the United States, colonizers, including anthropologists and ethnographers, have studied what they called "the berdache," a blanket term referring to Native people whom colonizers saw as cross-dressing and/or engaging in homosexual activities. "Berdache" originates from the Arabic *bardag* and Farsi *bardaj* (both meaning "captive"; "prisoner") and became *bardaje* in Spanish to mean the passive partner in homosexual anal intercourse (Fulton and Anderson 1992; McNabb 2018). According to Charlie McNabb (2018), "in the highly religious and patriarchal colonial Spanish culture, this role was repellent and immoral; indigenous persons engaged in this activity received the label, and the term was codified to refer to them" (35). By attributing this Western, patriarchal, Christian view of gender onto Native people who did not neatly fit into the Western gender binary, colonizers justified their violent conversion of "berdaches" into Western society. Due to its relationship to colonialism and the oppression of Native people, the term *berdache* is presently considered offensive and inaccurate, and Native scholars have chosen to use *Two-Spirit* as an alternative broad, intertribal term (Driskill 2016: 72; see also Davis 2014). Driskill affirms that using the term *Two-Spirit* "claims Native traditions as precedents for understanding gender and sexuality, and asserts that Two-Spirit people are vital to tribal communities" (73).

Along similar lines, María Lugones (2008) argues that Western binary views of gender were imposed on colonized and enslaved peoples to constitute the "modern colonial gender system." This process rearticulated gendered power relations as racialized power re-

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lations: That is, Natives were subordinated in European colonies in ways that paralleled the subordination of white women in Western society, and Native women were further subordinated to Native men. As one example among many, Cherokee men were drafted by English colonizers into patriarchal roles, whereas prior to colonization, the Cherokee nation was a gynocracy in which women held significant political and spiritual power (Gunn Allen 1992: 36–37). Some of these Cherokee men then colluded with colonizers to subjugate not only women but Black people, too, through the ratification of a new Cherokee constitution under colonist pressure (Gunn Allen 1992: 37).

The Western imposition of binary gender on colonized peoples is highlighted by the linguistic erasure of Native categories of gender (for grammar associated with these categories, see Abe, this volume). Information on the language used by Native people to refer to nonbinary genders comes primarily from colonizer accounts and may contain inaccuracies and European bias favoring the Western gender binary (Davis 2014). For instance, Kai Pyle (2018) discusses the wide range of errors in historical records regarding terms for Two-Spirit people in Ojibwe and Plains Cree. Nevertheless, historical records, when coupled with contemporary language use, demonstrate a wide range of variation in gender categories across Native communities. Some languages like Navajo (Epple 1998) and Mohave (Devereux 1937) traditionally have four gender categories—representing cis male, cis female, Two-Spirit AMAB (assigned male at birth), and Two-Spirit AFAB (assigned female at birth)—while many other languages have three categories. In Polynesian languages, the “third” category typically refers to AMAB individuals who are seen as feminine, as in Hawaiian (*mahu*), Samoan (*fa’afafine*), and Maori (*takatāpui*) (see Besnier and Alexeyeff 2014). In North America, systems with three categories show more variation, although the use of a special term for feminine AMAB individuals is still the most common pattern. Languages of this type include Lakhota and Dakhota (*winkte*), Cheyenne (*hemaneh*), Tewa (*kwidó*), Illinois (*ikoueta*), and Zapotec (*muxe*) (see Standing Bear [1933] 2006; Little Crow, Wright, and Brown 1997; Epple 1998; Stephen 2002; Picq and Tikuna 2019). However, in other languages with three categories, the third category may also refer to masculine AFAB, as in Blackfoot (*ninauposkitzipxpe*) (Lewis 1941). There are also languages in which the third category is neither male nor female in grammatical gender and may apply to AMAB, AFAB, and intersex individuals, as in the contemporary Cherokee term *asegi* (Driskill 2016). Other languages may categorize gender in still other ways, such as the Chumash term *’aqi*, a category that includes feminine AMAB and cisgender postmenopausal women (Hollimon 2000).

In addition to this broad range of nonbinary terminology, Native cultures prior to European colonization also held varying ideologies regarding the meaning and social status of nonbinary genders. In many cultures, those with nonbinary gender held specific religious or spiritual roles and were understood to have special religious powers. This was the case with the Quechua *quariwarmi* as well as *winkte* and *hemaneh* (Horswell 2006). In other cultures, such as the Chumash, AMAB Two-Spirit individuals were not considered special beyond their participation in activities otherwise associated with women. Among Alutiiq communities, Two-Spirit individuals are reported as not being spiritually special but able to bring good luck nevertheless (Jacobs and Cromwell 1992). However, in the view of col-

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onizers, this diverse array of nonbinary understandings of gender belonged to a single category of "immoral" acts, codified so by the blanket term *berdache*.

The violent restructuring of Native systems of gender demonstrates that gender cannot be separated from racial and land-based histories. Rather, the modern Western gender binary has been strengthened through the colonization and subjugation of Native people, especially Two-Spirit people. This oppression is ongoing, as Native Two-Spirit people seek to decolonize their nations that, through colonization, have accepted and affirmed the Western gender binary (Driskill 2016: 83). In anti-assimilationist moves, some Two-Spirit people today seek to re-integrate themselves into their nations and return to their accepted pre-colonial roles.

European colonizers likewise perpetuated the gender binary through the enslavement of people brought to the Americas from Africa. Western binary gender stereotypes reinforced racial distinctions between white gender identities and the gender identities of enslaved peoples (Lugones 2008). According to Kirsten E. Wood (2010), "white women should be virtuous and pure, while enslaved women were lustful and vicious. White men should be chivalrous and rational, while enslaved men were either infantile or savage" (523–524). In other words, colonizers perpetuated stereotypes that they associated with racialized slaves—savagery, viciousness, and the like—in order to distinguish white women and men from enslaved Black women and men, building the blocks of racialized gender oppression in the United States atop the oppression and genocide of Native people. The gendered effects of slavery continue today, with racism and patriarchy inextricably linked. For instance, Angela Davis (1981) illustrates the racially charged enforcement of rape charges, where Black men are fraudulently charged with rape by white women while Black women are sexually assaulted and silenced by the police. In line with Davis, Espiritu (1997) elaborates, "In general, men of color are viewed not as the protector [as white men are], but rather the aggressor—a threat to white women. And women of color are seen as over sexualized and thus undeserving of the social and sexual protection accorded to white middleclass women" (135).

The Western gender binary continues to be imposed on people of color in the United States—Native and Black people in particular—in ways that differentiate them from and place them below white people. Scott Lauria Morgensen (2011) explains the connections between colonialism and slavery on Native and Black communities as reflecting the "interrelated effects of white settler colonialism" (43). In light of the similarities between Native experiences of colonialism and Black experiences of slavery, it is not surprising that the Western gender binary has been reified and strengthened by subjugating both of these groups based on their supposed distance from Western understandings of normative gender (on normativity, see Motschenbacher, this volume). In sum, the Western gender binary is a product of white supremacy, and it especially affects communities of color. Nonbinary people, especially nonbinary people of color, must work against these effects to construct their nonbinary identities.

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The rise of modern Western nonbinary identities

As more people in Europe and North America have come to identify as nonbinary, the visibility of nonbinary people has increased in the "high GDP global Western public eye" (Richards, Bouman, and Barker 2017: 6). Through nonbinary activism, this increased visibility has led to institutional change. States like Washington, California, and New York officially recognize "X" as a nonbinary gender marker in government documents, and *The Washington Post* style guide includes the gender-neutral pronouns "they/them/theirs." Nonbinary activism on social media has additionally exposed a broad range of people to new understandings of gender. In Helana Darwin's (2017) virtual ethnography of a 2015 nonbinary Reddit page, one nonbinary Redditor reflected, "I think we are actually entering a very fortunate time in human history, with the way technology and social media platforms are rapidly connecting people with others outside of their bubbles. It isn't hard these days for any fish out of water to look online and realize there is a whole ocean of fish out there. I know I owe a lot of my journey of self acceptance to the likes of YouTube, Tumblr and Reddit" (6). The availability of such resources makes it easier for those questioning their relationship to binary gender (or "gender-questioners") to encounter ways of identifying that they might otherwise not know existed. As Piia Varis and Tom van Nuenen (2017) state, "it is increasingly difficult to realistically describe and explain people's everyday lives, interactions, and networks, not to mention their language use, without any reference to the internet" (475). The same is true for people who identify as nonbinary. In their book on nonbinary gender identities, McNabb (2018) notes how the popular blogging site Tumblr has provided greater visibility for nonbinary people with intersecting marginalized identities (24). Instagram is also an influential platform where nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people can share their unique ways of presenting through images and videos, garnering support and affirmation from fellow gender-questioners (see Wortham 2018). The internet affords non-cisgender people spaces where they can use language to explore ways of self-identification and self-representation. For example, transmen and transmasculine people may find safe forums for re-interpreting their purportedly "female" body parts in ways that are more consistent with the ways they identify (Edelman and Zimman 2014; Zimman 2014).

Nonbinary representation in popular culture has also grown as more celebrities identify as nonbinary. The representation of famous "nonbinary icons" may provide more support for gender-questioners to self-identify as nonbinary. In the last several years, many public figures have spoken about being nonbinary in publicized interviews and/or social media, among them Demi Lovato, Elliot Page, Janelle Monaé, Indya Moore, Amandla Stenberg, and Sam Smith. Such comments gain widespread attention. Janelle Monaé's tweet about being nonbinary, for instance, has been retweeted over 13,000 times and has over 100,000 likes at the time of writing (@JanelleMonae, January 10, 2020). Nonbinary people such as Alok Vaid-Menon and Jacob Tobia have grown in celebrity status simply for being outspoken about tearing down the Western gender binary. Taken alongside the robust influence of social media on the growing nonbinary population throughout the West-

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ern world, the ultravisibility of celebrities who identify as nonbinary—and of nonbinary people who are becoming celebrities—adds to a growing list of novel ways to identify that may resonate with gender-questioners.

Social media offers more diverse models of nonbinary identification than seen in the emerging representation of nonbinary people as young, white, AFAB, thin, and dressing in "neutral" or masculine-leaning clothing styles. In fact, some trans movements have been pushing for a broader recognition that one's presentation does not necessarily reflect their gender identity (e.g., Horowitz-Hendler 2020). In other words, if an AFAB person wears a dress, it does not necessarily mean that they identify as a cis woman or even as feminine. Social media has pushed this idea further by involving greater representation and activism from nonbinary people of color who challenge the whiteness of dominant representations. For example, the visibility of Black nonbinary celebrities such as Amandla Stenberg, Indya Moore, and Janelle Monaé provides support to gender-questioning people of color who do not feel represented by the emerging nonbinary stereotype.

Nonbinary gender in linguistic scholarship

The remainder of the chapter outlines the ways that nonbinary gender has been accounted for by scholars working in the fields of sociology, anthropology, gender studies, and linguistics. Because language is central to the production of nonbinary identities, I pay particular attention to nonbinary language practices, such as singular *they* in English as well as linguistic forms in other languages that have been used to express gender variance, especially in non-Western societies. After illustrating models of how nonbinary speakers mix and match binary gendered linguistic and social resources to construct nonbinary styles, I consider how race comes to play in understanding gendered speech.

Theories of gender in third wave feminism are able to account for nonbinary genders through an examination of gender performativity (Butler 1990). Performativity is the concept that gender is not what we inherently *are*, nor what parts our bodies do or do not *have*, but rather what we *do* (West and Zimmerman 1987; Butler 1990; see Milani, this volume). For example, Darwin (2017) explores the applicability of performativity for nonbinary people when asking how and to what extent participants in an online genderqueer Reddit community "do, redo, and undo gender" (1). She found that nonbinary people "do nonbinary gender" by flouting expectations associated with their bodies (such as an AFAB person using masculine signifiers) and subverting normative scripts of what it means to do binary gender, whether cis or trans.

Though performativity provides a stable base for researchers to consider how nonbinary people perform their particular nonbinary identities, a majority of linguistics research on nonbinary gender has focused on the epicene, gender-neutral pronoun (research which was rarely in reference to nonbinary gender before the late 2010s). Dennis Baron (1986) discusses the history of the (mostly failed) movements to create an epicene pronoun in English, given the considered ungrammaticality of singular "they" (as opposed to plural "they") and the proposed neutral application of "he." With this history in mind, Elaine M.

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Stotko and Margaret Troyer (2007) investigate the uptake of “yo” in Baltimore, Maryland, as a singular definite pronoun, suggesting potential new avenues for a gender-neutral singular pronoun in English. More recently, Evan D. Bradley et al. (2019) found that listeners prefer gender-neutral (i.e., where the gender of the referent is unknown to the speaker) as opposed to gender-specific (i.e., referring to a nonbinary referent) uses of singular “they.” Kirby Conrod (2019, this volume) found that younger speakers are more likely to both use and perceive singular “they” as referring to someone definite and specific than older speakers, suggesting grammatical norms are shifting in line with the growing number of people identifying as nonbinary and using “they/them” pronouns. Likewise, Mari Lund Eide (2018) found that among English speakers in Australia, younger people, people who identify as nonbinary, and people with an interest in gender-related topics have more positive attitudes toward and a greater tendency to use gender-neutral pronouns. Ellis E. Hernandez (2020) found similar effects, where younger, more highly educated people are generally more accepting of singular “they.” Alex Kramer, Julie Boland, and Robin Queen (2021) have shown that familiarity with “they/them” pronouns rather than age is a better predictor of a speaker’s likelihood to use singular “they” for a nonbinary referent. Some researchers have examined how languages with binary grammatical gender account for nonbinary identities, such as Hebrew (Bershtling 2014); Polish (Dziura 2018); Spanish (López 2019); French, German, English, and Swedish (Hord 2016); and Brazilian Portuguese (Borba and Ostermann 2007; Borba 2019).

For decades, linguists have been studying speakers who do not clearly conform to the Western gender binary. In their research on hijras, a group of people in India who are historically recognized as a third gender, Kira Hall and Veronica O’Donovan (1996) find that speakers assert their identity as “neither men nor women” by mixing feminine and masculine grammatical self-reference as well as other ideologies of gendered speech. In her work on Two-Spirit identities in the United States, Jenny Davis (2014) finds that speakers position themselves within the binaries of Western gender and sexuality while also making use of tribal-specific identifications. Rodrigo Borba and Ana Cristina Ostermann (2007) investigate how Brazilian travestis, AMAB individuals who seek to accomplish femininity and attractiveness to men through modifying their appearances, refer to themselves using feminine grammatical gender except for in situations where their femininity may be called into question (see also Kulick 1997). Martin Manalansan (2003) finds that among Filipino men living in New York City who consider themselves *bakla* (a Tagolog term referring to Filipino effeminate and gay men), the use of the vernacular swardspeak marks the speaker as bakla, determining the expression and uptake of their queer, multicultural identities. In the Polynesian country of Tonga, fakaleiti, people who were assigned male at birth and have a feminine gender expression and inhabit a gender liminality, strategically codeswitch to English to position themselves as cosmopolitan and to escape from their marginalized social position (Besnier 2003). Other gender-variant groups who have been studied in linguistics include ’yan daudu in Nigeria (Gaudio 1998, this volume), fa’afafine in Sāmoa (Schmidt 2003), tombois (Blackwood 2014) and waria in Indonesia (Boellstorff 2004), skesanas in South Africa (Rudwick and Msibi 2016), and kathoeys in Thailand (Saisuwan 2016) (see Hall 2003 for a critical review of linguistic re-

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search on non-Western gender expression). These studies on the language practices of non-Western gender-variant speakers illustrate the contextual nature of the Western gender binary.

Linguistic researchers have started recently to explore how speakers now identifying as nonbinary in Western contexts use language and other extralinguistic resources to construct their gender identities. Anna I. Corwin (2009) is often recognized as the earliest known study in linguistics on nonbinary gender performance. Phonetically, Corwin found that many nonbinary speakers exhibit a small pitch range (a stereotypically masculine feature) and high-rise terminals (a stereotypically feminine feature), which in her view demonstrates “a uniquely non-binary linguistic pattern” (6). Corwin (2017) revises this argument in a later study to suggest that genderqueer and nonbinary individuals make use of a variety of signs to construct their identities and that these performances change over time based on context. M. Joelle Kirtley’s (2015) dissertation on language use among three gender-nonconforming speakers in Hawaiʻi arrives at a similar finding: speakers differ in their use of gendered phonetic variables based on their varying identities and social goals-in-interaction. Sebastian Cordoba’s (2020) dissertation, which includes an analysis of a 2.9-million-word corpus of nonbinary language, extends Kirtley’s (2015) and Corwin’s (2017) observation that context affects nonbinary speech to argue that nonbinary language is “in flux at all levels: individual, social, and societal” (265). Because nonbinary people must take into account how their interlocutors will uptake their gender performance, “non-binary and binary trans people are potentially in a unique position of awareness and ability to intentionally manipulate their own presentation in a way that much of cisgender society does not have the tools to do” (Horowitz-Hendler 2020: 1).

The subfield of sociophonetics (see Calder, this volume) has fostered some of the most significant research to date on nonbinary speech. Gratton’s (2016) study of the use of the variable (ING) by two nonbinary Canadian speakers found that when these speakers were in primarily cisnormative spaces, each produced the realization of (ING) that mismatched what is expected of their sex assigned at birth. That is, in non-queer spaces, the AFAB speaker tended toward the stereotypically masculine variant [ɪn] while the AMAB speaker tended toward the stereotypically feminine variant ([ɪŋ]). This finding may be explained by Sharone A. Horowitz-Hendler’s (2020) observation that nonbinary speakers present in an anti-gender-normative way when in cisnormative public spaces to mitigate the assumption of their cisness and thereby challenge the “cisgender gaze” (5). Both of these studies show the influence of interactional context on nonbinary speech: cisnormative contexts appear to motivate the use of more, not less, nonbinary language features.

An array of sociophonetic studies conducted by nonbinary researchers also shows that nonbinary speakers pick and choose how to produce and combine variables based on their interactional and identity-based goals. Ynda Jas (2018) studied pitch among eight nonbinary speakers who attended school in Southern England while taking into account sex assigned at birth (SAB), age, gender presentation, sexuality, and affect. Jas found that masculine-leaning nonbinary speakers lower and restrict their pitch when speaking neutrally, further suggesting that nonbinary speakers modify their speech depending on in-

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teractional context. Maxwell Schmid and Evan Bradley (2019) studied the pitch and intonation of 30 speakers, nine of whom identified as nonbinary and the rest as cis or binary transwomen and -men. The average pitch of AFAB and AMAB nonbinary speakers was not significantly different and fell between the average pitch of women and men. Schmid and Bradley's findings suggest that nonbinary speakers flout social expectations of binary-gendered speech to create space for gender identities beyond simply feminine or masculine. Jo Pearce (2019) studied creaky voice and /s/ production among 17 non-cis speakers of UK English varieties who were living in Scotland and found that AFAB trans speakers—many of whom identified as transmasculine—had a higher /s/ mean frequency (or center of gravity) than AMAB trans speakers. Pearce attributes the use of feminine-associated /s/ production to the participants' desire to queer masculine gender expressions and distance themselves from toxic masculinity. The importance of this line of sociophonetic research is evidenced by the NoBiPho project (Brown et al. 2019), an international collaboration between eleven researchers seeking to determine the effects of nonbinary gender performances on preexisting binary gender paradigms, particularly with respect to the production and perception of phonetic variables. NoBiPho researchers are creating a corpus of nonbinary speech by providing nonbinary speakers with microphones and video-calling them to record interviews and reading passages. Studies like these are motivated by the following question: How do nonbinary people construct a nonbinary identity while existing under the Western gender binary?

Recent pioneering work in linguistics on non-normative gender identities has similarly shown that gender-nonconforming speakers may use gendered phonetic variables in unexpected ways in order to deconstruct the gender binary. Lal Zimman (2017) studied variation in the speech of transmasculine speakers (AFAB trans people who identify as masculine), including both fundamental frequency (f0) and the production of /s/ (on trans linguistics, see Zimman, this volume). As their f0 lowered from taking testosterone, the transmasculine speakers mentioned feeling more comfortable expressing their femininity: being perceived as men gave them the social room to position themselves against normative masculinity through the use of more feminine features like higher frequency /s/. In a similar vein, Jeremy Calder (2017) found that "radical" drag queens in San Francisco who subvert normative feminine gender presentation produce an even higher /s/ than drag queens who perform normative femininity. Like Zimman, Calder shows that gender-nonconforming speakers use gendered variables such as /s/ to position themselves against normative, binary gender. In my collaborative work with Calder (Calder and Steele 2019), we have additionally noted that masculinity and femininity are not singular ideals for nonbinary speakers, nor are they opposite and mutually exclusive poles of a gender binary. On the contrary, as this review suggests, there are multiple ways for non-normative gender speakers to perform both femininity and masculinity through linguistic and extralinguistic means.

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Nonbinary gender expression and race

The review of the literature thus far has shown that nonbinary speakers do not pattern neatly with feminine or masculine features, nor do they pattern neatly “in-between”; they inhabit spaces that do not comply with normative gender expectations. The same is the case for nonwhite speakers, who experience the Western gender binary differently than white speakers do. Nicolai Pharao et al. (2014) question how speakers in Copenhagen perceive fronted /s/ in two Danish speech styles delineated linguistically by differences in prosody: modern Copenhagen speech, which is primarily spoken by white Copenhageners and associated with coolness and pleasantness, and Copenhagen street language, which is primarily spoken by Turkish immigrants and associated with toughness and gangsterness. They find that the fronted realization of /s/ is linked to femininity and gayness in modern Copenhagen speech but to immigrantness and gangsterness in Copenhagen street language. Relatedly, Jeremy Calder and Sharese King (2020, forthcoming) found that Black women and men in Bakersfield, California, do not differ in their /s/ productions, indicating that current binary models of gender based on white speakers do not accurately encompass the language patterns of nonwhite communities. Both of these studies underscore the point that race is crucial to the constitution of gendered speech styles and cannot be left uninterrogated in language, gender, and sexuality research.

My own research on the language practices of Black and white nonbinary speakers seeks to answer two primary questions: (1) how do nonbinary people use resources that have been associated with binary gender to construct a specifically nonbinary gender expression?; and (2) given the influence of colonialism and slavery on the enforcement of the gender binary, how does race influence the speech of those who seek to go against the Western gender binary? Grounding this work in my lived experience as a mixed Black, Asian, and white nonbinary person in a community composed primarily of fellow nonbinary people, I aim to develop an understanding of how nonbinary speakers use the gendered sociophonetic resources available to them—specifically, /s/ and f0—to construct nonbinary identities, with an explicit focus on how race mediates gender expression for nonbinary speakers.

/s/ and f0 are two variables whose relationship to femininity and masculinity has been heavily documented. Cisgender women’s mean /s/ frequency and f0 is higher on average than men’s (Fitch and Holbrook 1970; Flipsen et al. 1999). While fronted /s/ is widely associated with heightened femininity, high f0 also correlates with high femininity ratings (Wolfe et al. 1990). Indeed, Benjamin Munson (2007) found f0 to affect perceived masculinity in cisgender men’s speech and perceived femininity in cisgender women’s speech. Nevertheless, these gendered phonetic differences do not simply mirror anatomical differences (Strand 1999; Fuchs and Toda 2010). As we saw in the previous section, Zimman (2017) and Calder (2017) have shown that gender-nonconforming speakers can use /s/ to position themselves against or toward normative femininity and masculinity, and numerous researchers have shown that fronted /s/ indexes femininity and gayness in the speech of cisgender gay men (e.g., Campbell-Kibler 2011; Podesva and Van Hofwegen 2016). By considering how nonbinary speakers use these variables that are so tightly tied

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to expressions of binary gender, we can better understand how nonbinary speakers construct nonbinary gendered styles.

Beginning with friends of mine, I recruited 20 nonbinary speakers living in Columbus, Ohio, through snowball sampling. Most speakers in the study knew each other through their involvement in the heavily overlapping underground art and radical activism scenes in the city, both of which have strong queer footholds where nonbinary people of various racial backgrounds often interact and commune with one another. I was also a participant in these scenes and knew most of the speakers through them. Columbus is a small city: when one frequents a specific scene, they see the same group of people over and over, and most people are friends of friends. This is especially true for nonbinary people within these scenes: since being nonbinary is still fairly uncommon in mainstream society, we make note of other nonbinary people we come across, often becoming friends with one another in attempts at fostering nonbinary camaraderie. The high degree of interconnectedness among nonbinary speakers in this study suggests that speakers are likely to have shared linguistic practices as a community of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992; Bucholtz 1999; Hazenberg 2016) as well as shared understandings of local nonbinary styles.

Of the 20 speakers selected for my study, half were Black and half were white; within each of these groups, half were AFAB and half were AMAB. There were thus five participants of each race and sex assigned at birth in each of the four demographic groups. The average participant age was 24.7 years of age with a range of 19–30 years. AFAB speakers who had taken testosterone were excluded from the participant pool; testosterone increases the size of the larynx and lowers f0, and the impact of testosterone on the voice is not a focus of this study.

The study had three components: a gender questionnaire, an ethnographic interview, and a reading passage. The primary purpose of the questionnaire was to quantify participants' personal identifications with femininity and masculinity. It also asked participants what sex they were assigned at birth, the pronouns by which they wanted to be referred to, and a pseudonym that they would like to be referred to for research purposes. Participants were given two scales from 0–100 to indicate femininity and masculinity for their gender on the day of recording. To gather information about how nonbinary speakers in the study conceive of their gender and its relationship to their race, I also used ethnographic methods, which allow for more nuance and individual complexity than a survey alone (see Gaudio, this volume). I conducted an ethnographic interview with each participant that lasted between 45 minutes to two hours and was recorded in a comfortably furnished sound-attenuated room. Lastly, after the interview, participants were given a printed version of the full Rainbow Passage (Fairbanks 1960) and instructed to read it aloud. This was used to gather data for phonetic analysis and was recorded in the same sound-attenuated room as the interview (for in-depth details on the study's methods and statistical analysis, see Steele 2019).

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Pitch, sex assigned at birth, and femininity

The results of the study with respect to f0 patterning, displayed in Figure (1), are consistent with much previous language, gender, and sexuality research on the use of this variable: AFAB nonbinary speakers had significantly higher mean f0 (191 Hz) than did AMAB nonbinary speakers (118 Hz). The finding aligns with previous studies on cisgender populations showing that speakers exposed to testosterone during puberty produce lower f0 frequencies (Fitch and Holbrook 1970; Lee, Potamianos, and Narayanan 1999). Notably, these results contrast with Jas's (2018) and Pearce's (2019) research on nonbinary individuals in British contexts, which found that speakers lack an SAB pitch distinction and exhibit a pitch range that falls in between the mean pitch averages of binary women and men. Perhaps nonbinary speakers in Columbus do not employ f0 to distinguish themselves as a group from cis and binary trans speakers in the same way that British nonbinary speakers do. Nonbinary speakers in Columbus, Ohio, may simply not collectively employ what may be called "nonbinary pitch" to index nonbinary gender. Instead, they may perform their self-identified gender through other variables—whether linguistic or extralinguistic—since, according to Desi, a Black nonbinary participant in my study, "there's so many different levels to how people present themselves." As suggested by Jeremy Calder and Ariana Steele (2019), nonbinary speakers may selectively use some linguistic resources and not others to perform gendered speech styles, and these resources will vary across situational contexts and local patterns.

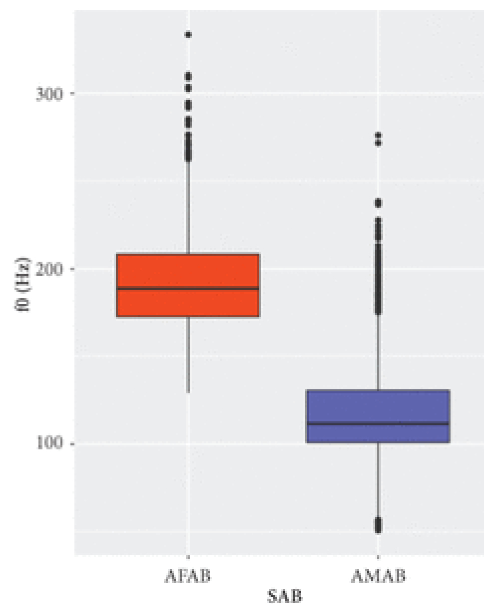

Figure 1: Boxplot of f0 by sex assigned at birth.

Looking beyond the demographic of sex assigned at birth thus presents a broader picture of how nonbinary speakers use pitch to perform their gender identities. As nonbinary speakers' self-identified femininity increased, their average f0 increased, too, regardless of their SAB. Figure 2 shows this result. This increase reproduces the high-low opposition found between the f0s of cisgender women and men onto a different level: that of nonbi-

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nary speakers and their associated self-identified relationships with femininity and masculinity. Judith T. Irvine and Susan Gal (2000) coined the term *fractal recursivity* to explain phenomena such as this: “the projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level” (973). Within each SAB grouping, speakers who self-identified as more feminine produced higher average f0 than those who self-identified as less feminine. In other words, because higher f0 is ideologically associated with cisgender women’s speech, f0 may be used socially to index femininity, regardless of one’s gender, sex assigned at birth, and perhaps even race. This adds to previous research on nonbinary speech in that it shows how a speaker’s *self-identified* relationship to gender influences their pitch, paralleling the finding that nonbinary speakers who identify as more feminine produce more feminine /s/ variants than those identifying as less feminine.

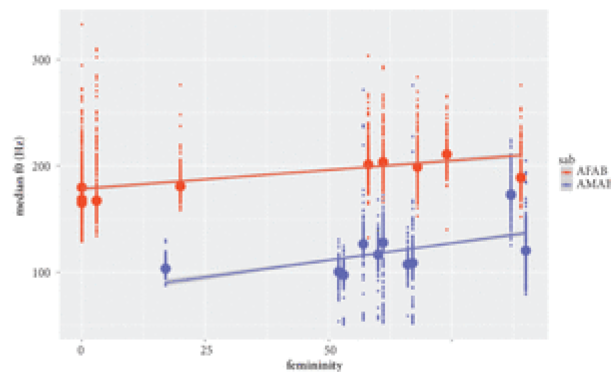

Figure 2: f0 by femininity ratings with sex assigned at birth.

/s/peaking against colonization

The results of the study with respect to /s/ patterning illustrate the importance of considering the influence of race on nonbinary performance. For Black speakers, as masculinity ratings increase, /s/ CoG also increases, as illustrated in Figure 3. (Note that this effect remains when excluding the masculinity outlier among the white speakers, located on the far right of the figure.) Because higher /s/ CoG is a feature typically associated with femininity (e.g., Campbell-Kibler 2011; Podesva and Van Hofwegen 2016), this result demands explanation. Based on my ethnographic interviews with these individuals, I suggest that these Black speakers are distancing themselves from a cisnormative, binary view of gender, similar to the non-normative gender speakers studied by Zimman (2017) and Calder (2017). In contrast, the /s/ CoG behavior of white nonbinary speakers affirms previous studies suggesting that lower /s/ CoG corresponds to higher masculinity ratings (e.g., Campbell-Kibler 2011). It appears that white speakers are engaging in a particularly white gender performance, since their /s/ production with respect to masculinity follows white speakers’ production patterns as previously studied. Put differently, white nonbinary speakers appear to uphold the Western gender binary through their use of /s/, while Black speakers deviate from this pattern of production.

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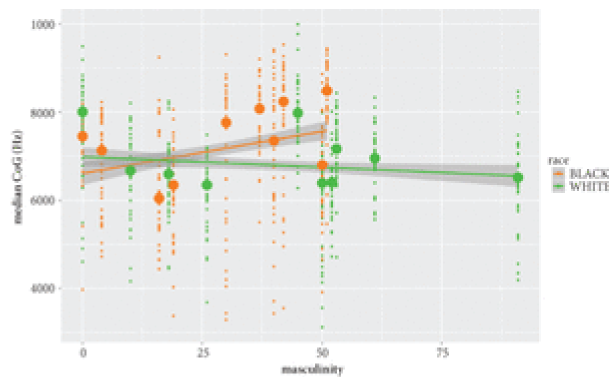

Figure 3: CoG by masculinity for Black and white speakers.

Race undoubtedly has an effect on how nonbinary speakers construct their gender. In the passage that follows, Apollo, a 23-year-old Black nonbinary artist in my study, explains the importance of their Blackness to their “nonbinariness”:

> When I discovered nonbinariness it made me question white, European just—colonialism? And it’s like when I discovered nonbinariness after a while, I got to this certain point where I was like, wait a minute, this is just a name for this thing that people in parts of Africa have always been doing! It’s like—it made me feel—being nonbinary makes me feel more connected to my Blackness … nonbinariness to me feels just—the word just feels like a way to describe what always existed.

Apollo describes how understanding nonbinariness helped them understand the erasure of Black nonbinary identities through slavery (“this is just a name for this thing that people in parts of Africa have always been doing!”). They see the term *nonbinary* as putting into words a concept that existed before the Western gender binary was put in place and continually reinforced through European colonization. For instance, scholars have argued that prior to colonization, Yoruba society did not have a system of gender, and anatomy was not seen as connected to roles and power (Oyewumi 1997). Through colonization, Europeans established a patriarchal state based on anatomy in which those labeled as women were subordinated to those labeled as men, and women were excluded from state and other positions in Yorubaland. For Apollo and many Black nonbinary participants, Blackness and nonbinariness are inextricably tied together. This makes it unsurprising that they would enact a Black nonbinary masculinity that is different from the masculinity enacted by white nonbinary speakers. In an effort to decolonize their bodies, Apollo and other Black nonbinary speakers construct their Black nonbinary masculinity against the oppressive system of Western binary gender—toward a Black nonbinariness that has “always existed.”

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Being Black and nonbinary: "Alternative" but not white

Black nonbinary speakers' use of /s/ reflects not just their gender nonconformity but also their racial nonconformity. Numerous Black authors have pointed to how other Black people sometimes criticize members of their communities as being too "white" when they express social signals of "alternativeness," such as listening to alternative music, dressing in punk or goth styles, or dying their hair in bright colors (e.g., Galloway 2018; Adegoke 2020), many social signals which nonbinary people also make use of. Brock, a 28-year-old Black nonbinary participant, attests to this, noting that "Blackness under the gaze of whiteness can be stifling." In Brock's view, such discourses put Black culture into a very small box in which only those who prescribe to American stereotypes of what it means to be Black can fit. Mike, a 19-year-old Black nonbinary artist in my study, further analyzes what it means to be Black yet not conform to stereotypes associated with Black people:

> I think because there is, like—cause there is like a strong stereotype for Black men and a strong stereotype for Black women and there is so much internalized discrimination in the Black community because of, like, European influences, that it's important to say and to make sure that, like, hey I'm Black and I'm nonbinary and it's okay.
>
> …
>
> Cause there are such, like, harsh stereotypes for like women and men and harsher stereotypes I feel for … minorities in different ways, and for Black women, it's always to be like … it's like you're angry and you're loud or you're over sexualized. And for men, you have to be really hard and have no emotions and you're scary and stuff, and I think like … that when a Black person tries to separate, like, it's viewed as themselves in terms of race. Like, I'm not all those things just because I'm Black but you cannot be any of those things because you're Black and trans. I feel, like … because of like how things are within the Black community, you can only do so much without like … without, like, people saying, oh you're trying to be white or you're trying to be this like … No! Like, really, you only think that because of the influence of European culture.
>
> …
>
> I mean, like, because of how … well like anything that relates to self-hate I think … because, I mean, well of course, like, Black people could have low self-esteem just because, but I feel like then that, like … I don't know um because there are so many caricatures in the media and stuff and like … and you go through history, it just gets worse and worse, like, I feel like anything that deviates from what … other races view you as is like you not being Black … you know what I'm saying?

In these three passages, Mike lays out the reasoning why Black people who are considered "Black alternative" are viewed as not Black enough. In Mike's view, both Black and non-Black people see gender alterity as a departure from Blackness instead of a depar-

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ture from normative stereotypes of Blackness ("I'm not all those just because I'm Black but you cannot be any of those things because you're Black and trans"). When Mike describes that there is "internalized discrimination within the Black community because of … European influences," they are referencing the hegemony put into play by colonialism and white supremacy, through which Black people themselves have come to accept the stereotypes of Blackness that continue to be promoted by the media and other dominant societal influences. For example, S. Plous and Tyrone Williams (1995) found that harmful Black stereotypes dating as far back as slavery—such as the stereotype that Black people have "thicker skin" and experience less physical pain than white people—are prevalent among both Black and white respondents. This internalization lies behind Mike's claim that both Black and non-Black people police Black people who depart from these harmful stereotypes. In the end, Mike asserts that it is "okay" to be Black and nonbinary: not fitting into the stereotypes associated with Black women and men is a viable way to be Black and should be accepted as such.

The Black nonbinary speakers in my study thus construct a specific kind of nonbinary identity that pushes against and away from racialized gender stereotypes cultivated through white supremacy and colonialism. In their uses of /s/, Black nonbinary speakers are not approximating whiteness (as often claimed in Black and white communities alike); rather, they are performing a Black nonbinariness that distinguishes them from their white counterparts *and* from normative stereotypes of Black cisgender women and men. Hortense J. Spillers (2006) has described Blackness as "an *alternative* statement, as a *counterstatement* to American culture/civilization, or Western culture/civilization, more generally speaking"—as a space of "contradiction, indictment, and the refusal" (Spillers 2006: 25, citing Marcuse 1965: 193). Marquis Bey (2017) has added that this description also pertains to Black transness. Black nonbinary speakers are not just pushing against normative stereotypes forced onto Black people through a history of slavery, racial apartheid, and continued racism, they are also rejecting the assumption—both from within and outside Black communities—that "Black alternative" people are attempting to be white. In other words, Black nonbinary speakers have extended "the refusal" of colonialist stereotypes to include the enforcement of these stereotypes within their own communities.

Conclusion

Through inhabiting the double-countercultural position of Black and nonbinary, Black nonbinary people find refuge in camaraderie with fellow Black nonbinary people. As Apollo explained, "the Black nonbinary experience is something that is unique to other Black nonbinary people, and so we get to share our own worlds. When you have other people who are seemingly at the fringe of a Eurocentric understanding, it just feels safer." As Black nonbinary people, we can "share our own worlds" because we have a series of similar experiences. We can connect deeply with one another because we are "at the fringe of a Eurocentric understanding," both by race and by gender. By distancing ourselves from Western binary gender, we end up at the fringes, yet it is in the fringe where we meet

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those we can most relate to and connect with. Building a Black nonbinary masculinity through the use of /s/ and other linguistic features forges new pathways for Black nonbinary people to build camaraderie with each other.

In this chapter, I have argued that studying the speech of nonbinary people allows for a broader understanding of how gender can be expressed in language, gender, and sexuality studies. I have also argued that the speech of nonbinary Black people in particular exemplifies a refusal of the Western gender binary that stems from the legacy of colonization and slavery. In sociophonetic terms, Black nonbinary speakers distance themselves from the ongoing effects of white supremacy through their use of the phonetic variable /s/. The construction of a Black nonbinary way of speaking enables marginalized individuals at this intersection to find refuge in a like-minded community with similar experiences of ostracization and identity creation. I have situated my research firmly in both gender and race so that the interconnectedness of the speakers' identities guides the analysis rather than serving as an analytical afterthought. Importantly, the analysis has been informed by the use of ethnographic methods, which allows for the inclusion of a greater range of experiences and a more complex understanding of the effects of these experiences on speaker behavior.

This chapter has above all emphasized the importance of incorporating race more overtly into the study of language, gender, and sexuality. Future study of nonbinary speech would additionally benefit from delving further into other intersections of identity, such as sexuality and socioeconomic status, to build a clearer picture of the interrelated effects of identities and experiences on the speech of those who distance themselves from binary gender. Taking an intersectional perspective in the study of gender must be integral to framing our analyses of gender expression, as the multiplex identities that people experience are always interconnected. At the same time, we must work harder to deconstruct notions that we continue to take for granted—whether the Western gender binary or the understanding of identity as a one-dimensional concept—in order to move toward a future where we can appreciate the richness of all people through the study of language. When we as language, gender, and sexuality researchers open our analyses to include race as centrally informing gender and vice versa, we strengthen the representations of our communities and our analyses of language and gender. If not now, when?

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