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Zinnia Robinson April 2, 2025

The Ballroom Masquerade: Gen-Z's Dance with AAE and Black Queer Intersectional Language

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Abstract

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Black queer language has had a traceable lineage from the nineteenth-century drag balls of the first self-proclaimed drag queen, William Dorsey Swann, to its first thrust into the mainstream with Jennie Livingston's 1991 underground Ballroom documentary *Paris Is Burning*, to present-day media like *RuPaul's Drag Race*. At the same time, it is being decontextualized and employed everywhere, from Atlanta housewives to the social media spaces of Generation Z. Many scholarly texts examine African American English (AAE) and queer language as distinctive spheres while I delve into the overlap. The goals of this study were to understand Generation Z's perception and usage of what I coin as Black Queer Intersectional Language (BQIL) by understanding what terms are included under this umbrella, what makes some user's performance of the language more authentic and genuine to my Black queer participants, and who has the "right" to BQIL and whether there is a way to reclaim language that has left this niche group. To answer these questions, this study relied on a Black queer focus group discussion, semi-structured interviews with self-identified queer students, and social media analysis. The subsequent data was analyzed through the frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and abolitionist anthropology. From the data, it was concluded that BQIL consists of phrases created, popularized, or predominantly used by Black queer individuals across time. While the majority state that Black queer people have the "right" to the language, heterosexual, non-queer Black people can also use BQIL authentically due to an essentialized Blackness. My Black queer interlocutors are less preoccupied with policing the overall *usage* of BQIL outside of the authentic group and instead seek to call out those who use the language in ways that are perceived as conditional, disrespectful, or patronizing. Reclamation of BQIL does not seem likely due to Generation Z's significant social media presence that furthers the disarticulation of Black queer culture from its roots. These findings are important because they explicate the intersection between AAE and queer language as BQIL and center marginalized voices in a generation at the forefront of media consumption.

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

In the words of Kevin Aviance, legendary Black drag queen, music artist, and nightclub personality, "What I don't understand is why all you i-generation-phone children...don't know your history, girl. Because if you think you're going to your future...you cannot at all. Because you got to know where I come from" (Allen, 2021, p. 28). For centuries, double-edged identity-based exclusion on the basis of Blackness *and* queerness has led these individuals to carve out their own spaces of self-determination. Black queerness is an act of two-fold defiance. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon constructs the theory of epidermalization which "suggests that Black children have been taught since early childhood to see themselves through the white imagination; that is, they have been unconsciously trained to correlate blackness with wrongness and whiteness with rightness" (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 24). In a similar framework, queer people are trained to implicitly internalize negative views on alternative modes of sexuality and gender expression in a dominantly heterosexual society. Black queerness' rejection of hegemonic rules allows it to operate in its own temporality, thus finding itself in a mainstream paradox of being frowned upon yet capitalized on in the media.

Presently, we see Black queer spaces being brought into the mainstream on television shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Pose*, or through musical consumption like Beyonce's *Renaissance* album or her 2016 song "Formation," which features the iconic phrase "I slay." Yet, we often do not consider the historical aspect of the media we consume, more specifically, that these previously-underground-now-platformed spaces are not new or something ingenious that has never existed before. This notion goes beyond lip-syncing and voguing battles, femme realness, or best dressed. This project seeks to apply this continuity to what I label Black Queer Intersectional Language (BQIL). According to Allen (2021), "Black gay is outside bourgeois

time, outside of nation time, ahead of time in culture—language, art, and fashion, for example—but also, in many ways, just out of time" (p. 6). Somehow, Black queerness occupies the past, present, future, and its own alternate timeline. This explains its heavy linguistic prevalence on social media platforms like TikTok and Twitter/X, especially by Generation Z users, many of which do not identify within the niche of being both Black *and* queer. Social media has led us to a globalized society where information can travel across continents in a matter of seconds and algorithms curate an individualized experience just for you based upon your likes, comments, reposts, shares, and following. While this can be positive for those seeking solace in a community of like-minded individuals, it also makes accessibility of information much easier for people outside the online community of origination. When Aviance reflects on his experience within Black queer spaces, he constructs a genealogy in which he states, "I come from another queen. And that queen comes from another queen. And that queen comes from another queen. And that queen comes from another queen" (Allen, 2021, p. 28). How can Black queer people born into this 'i-generation-phone' period know their linguistic history when the widespread availability of information via the internet disrupts direct lineage tracing? Do words hold the same weight when anyone can get ahold of them?

In this study, I speak directly to stakeholders and lean on linguistic and anthropological analysis. I aim to understand Generation Z's perception and intent of BQIL usage within the queer community, learn more about social media's role, uncover who people in Generation Z believe have the "right" to use this readily available language, and to understand how this discourse is rooted in history, identity, and arguments of reclamation. This study hinges on the following main research questions:

- What terms and phrases are considered BQIL, where do they originate from, and where are my Generation Z participants encountering them in their daily lives?
- Who has the "right" to Black Queer Intersectional Language (BQIL)? In what ways do history, identity, and reclamation influence this?
- What constitutes a "genuine" and "authentic" use of BQIL versus one that is deemed "ingenuine" or "inauthentic" in the eyes of my Black queer participants?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A vast amount of interdisciplinary research has been done exploring the issue of language rights and the appropriation of AAE and queer language separately, as well as the contributions that Black queer people have made to LGBTQ culture overall. The following study explores the language that comes out of the generative intersection between Blackness and queerness rather than exploring those linguistic identities as disconnected entities. There is no pre-existing concrete definition of Black Queer Intersectional Language (BQIL) in academia or what specific words and phrases fall into this understudied intersection. This project aims to center the marginalized voices of queer people in Generation Z to understand what is considered BQIL, who has the right to use it, and the linguistic appropriation and cultural competency discourse surrounding BQIL's adoption by various groups in an unprecedented age of connectivity with social media.

The History of African American English

During the first half of the 20th century, linguists and history scholars believed that the unique speech patterns of African Americans came from their attempts to imitate European American language and culture after forced conversion and ethnic mixing during enslavement completely eradicated any traces of African languages and culture. Contemporarily, it is mostly agreed upon that while European American influences have altered African American language and culture, it still has roots in African heritage, which was not entirely erased by enslavement (Smitherman, 1998, pp. 227-228). African American English (AAE) is made distinct from the European American language based on grammar and pronunciation, how special meaning is derived from English words, and a unique importance placed upon the interactive modes of oral

communication. Any references to AAE in this paper will fall under the subsect of contemporary urban AAE, which has roots in the South, but has since migrated to all parts of the United States, particularly large cities. Wolfram (2004) argues that "the center of African American youth culture is primarily urban, and many norms and models of behavior, including language, seem to radiate outward from these urban central hubs as the norms" (p. 113). Not only are these norms perceived and used by African Americans, but they are also picked up and used by non-Black groups through social media trends and rap music. The repercussions of using AAE are drastically different for different groups of people. African American AAE speakers often face "'linguistic profiling' – discrimination in the workplace, housing markets, and schools (Rickford et al., 2015). The indexing of Whiteness and Standard American English as normative and proper leads to the exacerbation of the negative racialized stereotypes against languages like AAE that are considered "disordered," "broken," or "uneducated" (Hill, 1998, p. 680). AAE use by non-Black people does not have the same damaging and harmful connotation. Non-Black AAE users often use it to index something about their personality, often that they are "cool," a concept that can be traced back to slavery and Jim Crow America in which a Black person with a "hot" temperament was in physical danger at the hands of racists (Smitherman, 1998, p. 226). This explains AAE-traced phrases like "keepin' yo cool," "I'm chillin'," and the newest addition popularized by social media, "is you coo?" Those who reduce AAE to just a trendy way to speak "deny the significance of black language and its history of bridging socioeconomic gaps and fostering an identity within the black community" (Mustafa, 2017, para. 5).

It is also important to note that this language is not a monolith but a complex system of Black thought and expression in which terms are constantly being invented, employed within

some sections of the community while not in others and pulled from the past into the present. According to Smitherman (1998), “the lexicon of the Black speech community crosses boundaries – sex, age, religion, social class, region...the Black lexicon is comprised of idioms, phrases, terms, and other linguistic contributions from various sub-communities within the larger African-American community” (p. 225). This can be applied to language coming from the Black LGBTQ community as well, as this paper explores BQIL.

History of Queer Language in the United States

Queer code languages emerged in response to historical marginalization, violence, and exclusion. The queer subculture of the United States does not have an elaborate alternative lexicon like the Polari language used in London and other parts of the United Kingdom from the 1930s to the 1970s, which allowed gay people to identify and communicate with each other in potentially unsafe public spaces (Lancaster University, n.d.). However, LGBT linguistics has found salient features of queer speech in North America, such as the phonetic ‘gay accent’ that allows queer people to signal their sexuality to each other ([@etymologynerd], 2023). It should be noted that the language of gay men has dominated the study of queer linguistics because they are believed to have a more salient and widespread way of talking, specifically marked by things such as a lisp and a higher pitch range (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 75). While gay men are often regarded as talking like women, lesbian women conversely speak like men. This stems from the heteronormative idea that “heterosexual speech is often equated with gender-appropriate speech, so homosexual speech has often been equated with gender-inappropriate or gender-deviant speech” (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 74).

Historically, the study of LGBT linguistics was not only focused on the homosexual male

voice; it was also centered around whiteness. This stemmed from the Gay Liberationist Movement that began in the 1950s and created the first semblance of a unified LGBT community due to its recognition and rhetoric surrounding homosexuality as a definable minority social identity that experiences oppression. The establishment of a somewhat stable LGBT community led linguists to reassert past claims that there are homosexual linguistic patterns that are unique to the LGBT community. The Gay Liberationist Movement came under fire in the 1990s by people with intersectional identities, such as lower socioeconomic statuses and minority racial identities, and those who did not identify as gay or lesbian, due to its preoccupation with adherence to respectability and identity politics (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 77). Since the Gay Liberation Movement mostly catered to white gay men, they focused on fighting to be accepted within the larger hegemonic and heteronormative society, a theory known as homonormativity. Duggan (2003) defines homonormativity as the following:

> A politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption. (p. 179)

According to McCann and Monaghan (2019), "Homonormative politics are concerned with individual domestic liberties such as marriage equality, rather than the collective public issues of Gay Liberation past, such as around housing, employment, and education (p.158). LGBTQ people who also hold other identities would continue to face obstacles with these essential programs even if equal access was granted to LGBTQ people due to other systemic and historical issues of racial and gender inequality. A new 'queer' political movement and theory arose to critique the Gay Liberationist Movement. This shift from LGBT to queer was significant

because “queer is a ‘deliberately ambiguous term’ that is simultaneously a way of naming, describing, doing, and being. This is where queer theory finds its radical potential as a term to challenge, interrogate, destabilise, and subvert” (McCann & Monaghan, 2019, p.1). Queer theory’s intentional ambiguity made it a place for radical frameworks for members of the community who did not align with the white homonormative agenda and felt undervalued within the Gay Liberationist Movement.

This shift from the Gay Liberationist Movement to a queer movement also led to a change from LGBT linguistics to *queer* linguistics. Queer theory allowed queer linguistic scholars and researchers to analyze how identities are cultivated and maintained through systems of power in the United States and shift from “seeing identity as the *source* of particular forms of language, to seeing identity as the *effect* of specific semiotic practices” (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p.78). In this way, language indexes sexuality rather than the reverse. Language becomes an active agent that people map their gender and sexuality onto rather than a passive result of someone’s selfhood. These identity constructions that are employed through language are not permanent or fixed and tend to be temporary and ever-changing depending on the space that a person is performing their identity within or what aspects they want to front in a conversation (Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013, p. 522). Analyzing talk patterns within subsections of the queer community can reveal a lot about the ways they perceive themselves and what they intend to project about their identity to others. Contemporary examples of the manifestation of queer linguistics as identity construction are explored in the literature review section titled ‘The Digital Mask.’

The Intersection of AAE and Queer Language Throughout Time

The Black community and queer community experience a "shared legacy of hate, racism, discrimination, and oppression" (Davis, 2021, p.14). Black queer people occupy the intersectional space of these two identities and, as a result, experience a compounded system of marginalization and discrimination for aligning themselves with two historically disenfranchised groups. As Davis (2021) aptly points out in the introduction of their piece about the impact of Blackness on queer vernacular, "For centuries, Blacks were not allowed into white spaces, and by extension, Black gay people were not welcomed into white gay spaces" (p.14). This isolating experience created the impetus that led to the underground Ballroom and House culture today. In 1967, Crystal LaBeija, a Black transgender woman who participated in drag pageants, was outraged and walked off the stage at a white-organized Drag Ball that she believed was rigged to help a white, blonde drag queen win. Despite Ballroom culture being created by Black and Latinx drag queens, "it, like everything else, was affected by class and racial barriers...At these events, white performers could afford the best costumes, and Black performers were expected to lighten their faces just to compete" (PBS, 2021). This, and many other ostracizing experiences, led LaBeija to organize a Ball for Black drag queens in 1972. Another Harlem drag queen, Lottie, suggested that Crystal promote the event by creating a group named 'House of LaBeija' where Crystal served as Mother of the House. This inspired other Black and Latinx queens to establish their own houses, creating a House culture. The Mothers and Fathers of each House "looked after their drag children, teaching them dance, fashion, and makeup techniques to help prepare them for Balls...They weren't all just about fashion and style either. They were also safe havens for displaced youth who had either been discarded by their biological families or were living on the streets" (PBS, 2021).

The Ballroom scene portrayed today and known to have found its beginnings in the 1970s, can be traced back to the 1880s with the establishment of the House of Swann. William Dorsey Swann, an African American born into slavery, became the first self-proclaimed drag queen and pioneered the House of Swann as a secretive place where Black queer people could "be social with one another without facing public hostility: a place where they could dismantle their double battle of being Black and LGBTQ, a space where they could be visible to each other, yet still remain invisible to the general public" (Morgan, 2020, para. 10). Houses in the Ball scene have been less about a physical structure with a bed to sleep in and more about finding a sense of

belonging and a support system for centuries. The whispers of racism and exclusion of the past continue to permeate Black queer lives today. While the physical Ball scene still exists today and is celebrated in television shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Pose*, Black queer people today also look for solace and solidarity online in spaces like 'Black Twitter' and hashtags on other social media apps like TikTok where '#blackqueer' and '#blackqueertiktok' have amassed thousands of posts and endless engagements. The internet is what makes the queer spaces of today different from those of the past, particularly for Generation Z.

Generation Z's Internet Usage and Slang

According to the Pew Research Center, Generation Z encompasses individuals born between 1997 and 2012 for analytically meaningful purposes (Dimock, 2019). When comparing Gen Z to their predecessors, they are regarded as the most racially and ethnically diverse. They are also known as the first digital natives, born when technological innovation was at its peak. Having readily accessible internet access means that Gen Z has "an abundance of information at

their fingertips...social media can also offer social support from peers or others, which may be especially beneficial for marginalized young people, such as sexual and gender minorities" (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024). Young people in the LGBTQ community spend an average of five hours per day online, which is approximately 45 minutes more than their peers (GLSEN, 2013). A 2023 United States national survey on the mental health of LGBTQ young people between the ages of 13 and 24 found that their experience in the digital sphere is highly nuanced. Finding security and understanding in at least one online space is associated with lower suicide risk and anxiety for all queer youth, particularly queer people of color, who had 19% lower odds of experiencing anxiety when they had at least one online space where they felt safe than queer people of color who did not. On the other hand, the rates of finding safety and connection on specific social media platforms were significantly different for people of color when compared to their white peers. Queer youth of color reported significantly higher rates of feeling safe and understood on platforms like TikTok, Discord, and Twitter when compared to their white counterparts but also significantly lower safety rates in places like Reddit, Facebook, and even dating apps (The Trevor Project, 2023). The instantaneous dissemination of information to broad audiences also means that information can quickly leave the group it originated in to be presented in other contexts. For marginalized communities, such as Gen Z's Black queer youth, social media and the internet function as both a place of celebration and solidarity and a place to be censored or co-opted through hashtags, algorithms, and viral videos. This phenomenon can be applied to language, and this specific project will focus on 'Gen Z slang.'

Mattiello (2005) defines slang as "the restricted speech of marginal or distinct subgroups in society...it is a quite temporary, unconventional vocabulary characterized by connotations of informality and familiarity" (pp.10-11). In this thesis, I will consider Gen Z slang to be any

colloquial terms that are used and popularized by people born between 1997 and 2012 in the Western world, with a large focus being on the United States. Thanks to the internet's ability to instantaneously transmit information around the world, new trending words pop up often, and when the user has a large enough social following, they reach a substantial amount of people, especially through platforms like Twitter and TikTok. Rett (2023), notes that when compared to its predecessors, Gen Z's vocabulary list is "quantitatively different. There seems to be much more of it, and the life cycles of Gen Z slang terms seem much more abbreviated than their Gen X or Boomer counterparts" (para. 6). Just as soon as a catchy word or phrase starts trending, it gets replaced by something new. This makes the Gen Z slang codex both significantly longer and notably short-lived. For all its differences in quantity, Gen Z slang is qualitatively similar to previous generations because a large portion of the terminology used is taken from Black culture, the LGBTQ+ community, the drag community, and other subcultures (Dictionary.com, 2022; Rett, 2023; Tenbarge, 2020). This includes historically familiar words like 'chile', 'slay', 'it's giving,' and 'woke.' According to a Dictionary.com article that defines some Gen Z slang terms and explains their origins, the reason that words from marginalized groups are absorbed into larger youth culture is due to "creativity, appeal, and just plain usefulness...This adoption, in many cases, involved appropriation that ignores, obscures, or erases the terms' origins and originators" (2022).

Appropriation from Black Queer Spaces

The online Cambridge English Dictionary (n.d.) defines appropriation in the sense that I will be using it as both "the act of taking something for your own use, usually without permission" and "the act of taking something such as an idea, custom, or style from a group or

culture that you are not a member of and using it yourself." I will be exploring the linguistic appropriation of BQIL. Essentially, I will look at the adoption of linguistic patterns, words, and phrases of BQIL by other groups and the level to which the roots are acknowledged and social implications are understood. I define BQIL as jargon or terminology that is perceived to be created by and predominantly used by people who identify as both Black *and* queer.

Appropriation from Black queer spaces is not language-exclusive, nor is it a new phenomenon. A prominent example that comes out of 1990s Ball culture is centered around voguing; a highly stylized improvisational dance that transformed New York drag balls from pageants to vogue battles. Voguing as we know it today is often credited to Willi Ninja, a prominent figure of the Harlem Ballroom scene who drew inspiration from mimes and martial arts to create his sharp movements (Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, 2023). In 1991, Jennie Livingston released her documentary *Paris Is Burning*, which illuminated the underground Ballroom scene of 1980s New York City and included footage from voguing competitions. Following Livingston's success, there was a lot of anger and resentment in the world of ballroom. Some of it came from arguments that a white woman commodified Black and Latinx people for white consumers, while many of the film's participants were outraged about compensation. The documentary grossed $4 million, and only about $55,000 went on to be split among the film's thirteen main participants based on screen time after she was threatened with lawsuits (Green, 1993, Section 9, p.1). In the same era, Madonna released her hit song "Vogue," which she took on a world tour and has sold over six million copies. By the end of June 1990, the song went double platinum, where it remained until July 2024, when it officially went triple platinum and became the biggest song of her career (McIntyre, 2024; Rosenschein, 2024). Madonna was also criticized by people in the New York City ballroom who saw outside interest

in their subculture diminish because "Madonna gobbled it up, appropriating two [members of the House of] Xtravaganza[s] in the process" (Green, 1993, Section 9, p.11). Ultimately, allowing mainstream participation in the ballroom subculture ironically drew attention away from the subculture itself, leaving people like *New York Times* journalist Jesse Green to conclude in 1993 that "Paris is no longer burning. It has burned" (Section 9, p.1).

Appropriation of Black queer culture and BQIL in the media continues to be a problem today and is only exacerbated by the internet. Take, for example, the online dispute between rapper Coi Leray and social media figure Rolling Ray over the word 'purr.' The earliest reference to the word that I could find came from a screen-recorded video posted on TikTok in 2020 in which Rolling Ray proposes that 'purr' should be the replacement pronunciation of 'period,' which is used to convey that there is nothing left to be discussed or debated on a topic ([@prettyboydae], 2020). In 2021, Coi Leray released her viral song "BIG PURR (Prrdd)" featuring Pooh Shiesty. Rolling Ray posted a video on Instagram claiming that Coi Leray stole 'purr' from him and argued for recognition. Coi Leray denied these claims and said she refers to herself as 'big prrr', not 'big purr' despite the song's title (Marie, 2022; [@LaJanee], 2021). Rolling Ray went on to claim in an Instagram Live that he was "tired of gay artists having their ideas stolen, and he wanted to prevent the same thing from happening to 'purr'" (Gordon, 2021). Rolling Ray's overall claim about mainstream culture stealing from queer culture was ultimately overshadowed by his reputation for being a controversial internet troll and a prominent person that people quote, turn into memes, and mock due to his unapologetic identity as a Black, gay, and disabled person.

The Digital Mask

Some online appropriation instances are much less direct than the Coi Leray and Rolling Ray exchange. Social media users are granted a certain level of anonymity, allowing them to act in ways that may not reflect how they would respond in an in-person exchange (McAndrew, 2022). Many social media sites do not require identity verification and give users complete control over their profile photo and what they post as long as it does not violate community guidelines. Social media's algorithms and connectivity also allow people to curate and join groups of like-minded individuals, known as 'echo chambers' (Hall Jamieson & Capella, 2008). This term refers to how "social media communities and feeds tend to be formed or occupied by niche opinion and interest groups who engage little with wider civic debate, nor with different points of view" (Bouvier, 2020, p. 108). These 'echo chambers' exist across all major social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, and influence the type of content a user sees. As Ilbury's 2019 orthographic Twitter study of a group of white gay men using AAVE demonstrates, these spaces can become breeding grounds for linguistic appropriation. Their use of words like 'lawd,' 'gurl,' and 'werk,' which are commonly used by Black women, these men exhibit two of this project's most critical linguistic phenomena: *enregisterment* and *stylization*. Ilbury (2019) defines enregisterment as follows:

> Essentialized personifications of the imagined typical user, linked with non-linguistic attributes, such as social class, conduct, and other mental and aesthetic qualities. Thus, in deploying a specific linguistic feature, the user can evoke the characterological figure(s) associated with that style and capitalize on its interactional potential. (para. 22)

Enregisterment is the vehicle that makes stylization possible because it makes linguistic forms ideologically related to social identities. Stylization refers to instances where "the speaker produces 'specially marked and often exaggerated representations of languages, dialects, and

styles that lie outside their own habitual repertoire'" (Rampton, 2009, as cited in Ilbury, 2019, para. 20). Stylization serves as the verbal manifestation of a speaker's conception of the attributes of a group and how they use language to index those attributes. In Ilbury's work, 'Sassy Queens' are effeminate white gay men who are employing AAVE based on the essentialized idea that Black women are sassy and fierce. Their use of AAVE, typically associated with Black women, allows them to perform their confident feminine identity that does not conform with how hegemonic society would view their gender. Similarly to how queer theory positioned identity as a result of language practices, gender performativity theory conveys that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1999, p.25). While the use of this language inherently challenges the United States' historical gender binary that casts men as masculine, there is also a lot to unpack about the significance of a white male using the language of a Black woman. According to Butler (1999), "Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony" (p. 177). There is a fine line between the use of Black women's AAVE as a subversive tool to challenge the gender binary and the perpetuation of a harmful stereotype that equates a Black woman's diva streak and fierceness with being "ghetto" and "ratchet." In attempts to index their own identities, Ilbury's 'Sassy Queens' become a caricature of Black women in the United States.

The digital mask is not just about hiding behind a profile picture. You can show yourself online and still contribute to the masking problem. For example, Australian rapper Iggy Azalea has been criticized for using a 'blaccent,' which many people online have referred to as 'verbal

blackface,' in her music while speaking in her Australian dialect in other contexts like interviews and podcasts (Willen, 2021). Her stylized 'blaccent' represents her unspoken acknowledgment that there is a stylized way that successful people in the rap genre present themselves and her attempts to fit in with them via her reliance on the essentialized and enregistered idea that African American men and women who use AAE have a confident swagger and toughness that makes them more successful over others within the same genre. Despite moving through the world as a public figure, she still wears a mask that has allowed her to build an online presence to increase her social capital and can also remove it to move through the world more easily. Despite the backlash these celebrities and public figures get, a significant enough audience still rewards them for this mask and encourages them to continue their performativity. Even within online 'echo chambers,' unfamous users are surrounded by like-minded individuals who use the same rhetoric and encourage them to continue its usage without repercussions.

The Appropriation Discourse and Reclamation Trend

As trends of language appropriation have risen online, so have counter-movements aimed at reclamation. Linguist Melinda Yuen-Ching Chen (1998) defines reclamation as the following: "An array of theoretical and conventional interpretations of both linguistic and non-linguistic collective acts in which a derogatory sign or signifier is consciously employed by the 'original' target of the derogation, often in a positive or oppositional sense." (p. 130). There are three identifiable goals of reclamation: value reversal, neutralization, and stigma exploitation. Neutralization involves rendering hate speech terms as powerless with no positive or negative connotation, essentially killing any force the word contains. Value reversal relies on a group's agency to take a negative word weaponized against them and turn it into a positive as

something desirable or positive (Brontsema, 2004, p. 8). For example, the word *cunt* originated as a neutral word to refer to female genitalia but has historically been used as a derogatory term by cisgender men against women, often when their catcalling advances are rejected or they are critiquing a woman's attitude toward them (Brontsema, 2004, p. 8). As women began to reclaim the word and transfer it to more positive contexts, such as artist Tracey Amin's 1997 art installation *CV: Cunt Vernacular,* in which it is used to reframe negative narratives about her sexual promiscuity and abuse, *cunt* shifted to being a desirable attribute. The shift in this term is further supported by the underground Ballroom and Drag phrase 'serving *cunt*,' which is often used in femme categories as high praise for someone who is demonstrating a confident and potent display of womanhood, also known as 'femme realness' (Abraham, 2023, para. 5). The third goal of reclamation is stigma exploitation, which seeks to underscore and maintain a word's stigma rather than remove or transform it. The word *queer* is considered stigma exploitation because referring to oneself as queer is an acknowledgment of the stigma that frames someone as deviant from the norms of heterosexuality and forces people to confront how our social reality constructs these norms and whether they are legitimate (Brontsema, 2004, p. 10).

As Smitherman (1998) points out, "Today we are witnessing a multi-billion-dollar industry based on this linguistic and cultural phenomenon while there is continued material underdevelopment and deterioration in the *hood* that produces it" (p. 241). The appropriation of BQIL comes without acknowledgment or remuneration to the queer community itself, which continues to be marginalized. Yet, these words go on to be used in entirely different in-person and online contexts. A section of this project is dedicated to centering the interlocutors as agents within this larger conversation on language reclamation. Reclamation is not a linear phenomenon, and its "indeterminacy can be explained in terms of reclamation itself as a process,

the ambiguous appearance of success or failure, and the different goals both across and within reclamations" (Brontsema, 2004, p. 14). With phrases constantly coming into being, experiencing resurrection from the distant past, and going out of style, the types of reclamation are constantly changing. With the internet, the feasibility of reclaiming certain words changes as they reach broad audiences. Brontsema (2004) posits, "a once pejorative word now mainstreamed is not necessarily a word reclaimed" (p.14). While queer culture coming into the mainstream should be celebrated because of its role in increasing visibility, it should also be critiqued for what it has taken away from these previously intimate and exclusive spaces.

Conclusion

This chapter serves to contextualize the history of appropriation of Black and queer culture and language through an intersectional scope rather than two distinctive spaces. Generation Z and the advent of social media are brought into this conversation of language appropriation as they both work to perpetuate the issue through ease of access to different communities, large consumption of media, and the ability to appear anonymously. While no current studies are fronting the voices of queer members of Generation Z or defining BQIL as a prominent source of modern colloquial language, this is a generative space to understand more about language rights and reclamation and the double-edged sword of the internet. Therefore, this study seeks to understand what mediums BQIL is adopted from, who people believe has the right to use the language, and how this is rooted in a larger context of history, identity, and reclamation.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the data collection methods and their limitations, CA transcription, and data analysis frameworks on which this study is built.

Positionality Statement

My identity is overtly intertwined with this project. As a Black queer woman, I recognize that "my Black queer body is both research instrument and research subject" (Shange, 2019, p. 6). I am also co-lead of a Black queer community group and a student programming assistant for the Office of LGBT Life. I expected my identity to be an obstacle that left me open to greater assumptions about my positionality by my interlocutors. This may have caused them to be less candid about their AAVE and BQIL usage out of fear of judgment. However, my identity also meant that I built some previous rapport with my interlocutors, potentially encouraging more openness.

Participants

A substantial portion of this project is founded upon one focus group and seven one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. All participants were required to be at least 18 years of age, undergraduate students at Emory University, and self-identify as queer. All participants have been given a pseudonym to de-identify them from their quoted data.

Focus Group Participants

All of the focus group participants were attendees of a Black queer community group in the Emory University Office of LGBT Life that is open to all members of the Emory undergraduate community but aims to cater to queer Black students specifically. Meetings primarily take place in the Office of LGBT Life, located on the 3rd floor of Cox Hall, which houses the following identity spaces: Centro Latinx, Emory Black Student Union, the Asian

Student Center, Emory First, the Office of LGBT Life, and the Center for Women. There is also an intersectional space between the individual rooms that is open to all. As co-lead of the group, I was able to display a physical copy of my study flyer at the first meeting of the Fall 2024 semester. Interested group members contacted me individually to exchange contact information and schedule a date and time. The focus group occurred in the Cox Hall 3rd floor Media Room on November 4th, 2024. The name, designated letter for speech segments, and necessary biographical information are located in the table below (Fig.1).

Name	Pronouns	Year	Biographic Information
Jaylah (B)	she/her	Fourth	Born in Harlem + raised in Atlanta, identifies as African American and Caribbean American (Bajan + Puerto Rican)
Orion (C)	he/they	Fourth	Atlanta native, identifies as African American
Eden (D)	they/them	First	First-generation Gambian American raised in Houston, TX suburbs
Joseline (E)	she/her	Fourth	First-generation Trinidadian American raised in NJ
Tyler (F)	they/she	Fourth	Born and raised in Covington, GA, identifies as African American

Fig. 1: Focus group participant names, letters assigned during transcription, and biographic information

One-on-One Interview Participants

Individual interviewees were selected by directly presenting my study flyers to frequent users of the Office of LGBT Life space and through snowball sampling, in which interlocutors told their friends about the study. A total of seven interviews were conducted with 2 Black queer participants and five non-Black queer participants. Below are the one-on-one interview participants' names, pronouns, and necessary biographical information (Fig. 2).

Name	Pronouns	Year	Biographic Information
Giselle (G)	she/they	Third	First-generation Ghanaian American, identifies as African American, raised in Gwinnett County, GA

Mila (H)	she/her	Third	Born and raised in Palm Coast, FL, identifies as white and Honduran
Mari (I)	he/him	Fourth	First-generation Indian American, raised in several southern states and MD
Luna (J)	she/they	Third	First-generation Salvadoran American, born and raised in Houston, TX
Charli (K)	they/he	Fourth	Identifies as a white American, raised in AL
Orion (C)	he/they	Fourth	See Fig.1
Claire (L)	she/her	Second	Identifies as a white American, born and raised in a predominantly white metro-Philadelphia, PA suburban area

Fig. 2: One-on-one interview participant names, letters assigned during transcription, and biographic information

Data Collection

The data in this study is extracted from the audio-recorded focus group and semi-structured interviews, as well as social media content referenced by my interlocutors. All interview and focus group participants were informed of their rights to refuse to answer questions and stop the interview at any time and were required to complete an informed consent form. All participants, social media commenters, and content creators will be de-identified from posts unless they possess accounts with a substantial following and are verified by their respective social media sites.

Focus Group Interview

The following prompts and questions guided the 72-minute focus group interview with the Black queer community group participants:

- A collaborative brainstorming activity to form a list of words and phrases that they collectively agree are BQIL.
- Who do you think has the 'right' to use BQIL? Why?
    - I encouraged them to pull from their historical knowledge, personal experiences, and online discourse.

- What differences do they perceive when a Black queer person uses BQIL vs. a non-Black queer person? What do you read about their intention?
- What aspect(s) of Generation Z has allowed this intersectional language to spread beyond the group that created it?
- Are there any specific social media trends or creators that speak to or exemplify this topic?
- What future do they see for this topic? Is the trend of holding people accountable and educating them on the origin of words and trends fruitful?

Semi-structured Interviews

The following prompts and questions guided the one-on-one interviews (interviews averaged ~45 minutes):

- Where are you from, and what kind of demographic would you grow up with (racial/ethnic, sexuality)?
- What do you identify as (racial/ethnic, sexuality, gender identity)?
    - Can you rank those aspects of your identity based on their importance to you?
- Allow them to assess the BQIL list created by the focus group participants
    - What do you believe are the true origins of these words (group, movement, decade, identity space, etc.)
    - Where have you been exposed to the phrase most (online, in person, from who)?
    - Did you notice any patterns in where you encountered these words?
    - What connection do you perceive between your encounters with the phrases and where you believe the words originated?

- Many of these words have become synonymous with “Gen-Z slang” in online spaces. What do you know Gen-Z slang to be?
- As it refers to this topic, do you think that social media is positive, negative, or neutral thing?
- Can you talk about a time that you’ve witnessed someone using BQIL that you feel didn’t hold one or both of the identities (Black and queer) OR a time that you have used language that would be considered BQIL (if the participant self-identifies as non-Black)?
    - 1st scenario: What do you think their intentions were vs. how was it perceived by you and/or other witnesses?
    - 2nd scenario: What were your intentions when using BQIL in that situation? Do you feel like your intentions were understood by the people who were present?
- What differences do you perceive when a Black queer person uses BQIL vs. a non-Black queer person?
- Who do you believe has the ‘right’ to use BQIL?
    - I encouraged them to pull from their historical knowledge, personal experiences, and online discourse.
- What future do they see for this topic? Is the trend of holding people accountable and educating them on the origin of words and trends fruitful?

Transcription

To avoid perpetuating the harmful systems of normalcy and etiquette that have led to the marginalization of Black and queer people in the United States, I include unedited approximations of my interlocutor’s speech as a means of decentralizing and defying the esoteric language of white heterosexual scholars in a way that “privileges the social lexicon of the key

participants" (Shange, 2019, p.17). All quoted speech excerpts presented in this project are transcribed using Conversation Analysis (CA) transcription to increase accuracy. CA transcription privileges the social organization of everyday exchange in both formal and informal settings. Pomerantz and Fehr (1997) argue the following:

> The organization of talk or conversation (whether 'informal' or 'formal') was never the central, defining focus in CA. Rather it is the organization of the meaningful conduct of people in society...how people in society produce their activities and make sense of the world about them. The core analytic objective is to illuminate how actions, events, objects, etc., are produced and understood rather than how language and talk are organized as analytically separable phenomena. (p. 65)

This transcription style comes with a set of conventions that enhance stretches of talk so that the reader can interpret intonation, inflection, and accent (for a list of CA convention symbols used in this project's dialogue and their definitions, see Appendix).

CA transcription will allow me to capture the speech style of my interlocutors most accurately and center the voices of my participants and Black refusals to conform to Standard American English. This was inspired by the anthropological work of Zora Neale Hurston, who was committed to accurately representing Black voices and consequently called into question the hegemonic notions of a "correct" way of speaking in academia.

Data Analysis

The main chapters of this project are thematically organized based on salient motifs and points of contention that were brought up across the interviews. The major themes in this project will be analyzed through the lens of abolitionist anthropology and critical discourse analysis. Abolitionist anthropology is theorized by anthropologist Savannah Shange (2019) to be

"apprehending the necessary conjuncture of antiblackness theory and a critical anthropology of the state" (p. 6). Abolitionist anthropology recognizes the inadequacy of progressive institutions and ways of thinking in including and liberating Black communities. It encourages anthropologists to reflect critically on their positionality, avoid linear framing, and consider intersectional viewpoints. Abolitionist anthropology "finds its answers in the register of the quotidian, in the cruddy, ordinary facts of blackness" (Fanon, 1967, as cited in Shange, 2019, p. 9). Using this thesis as a platform, my Black interlocutors and I engage in *willful defiance,* a practice of Black refusal that not only rejects the political but challenges the legitimacy of the state and its effects through our use of "unprofessional" language and critiques of multiracial solidarity's efficacy in everyday interactions (Shange, 2019, p. 16).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) "studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (van Dijk, 2001, p.1). Analyzing the various viewpoints on the adoption of BQIL by non-Black queer people, the contexts in which they use it, and who is present in these spaces is significantly linked to the concepts of identity, indexicality, and power that will be explored further in this project. CDA will be applied to conversations with my interlocutors and my analysis of online communities.

Conclusion

This chapter describes the research study design, methods, and frameworks for analysis and how these methods will be applied to address the research questions surrounding the perception of BQIL in Generation Z.

Why Emory? A Long Way from 1836

Emory University was founded in the town of Oxford, Georgia, in 1836 as a white-only institution. In 1919, Emory's main campus moved to Atlanta and named its original location Oxford College. This study focuses on the experiences of students attending the main campus in Atlanta. The university officially desegregated in September of 1962 and admitted its first Black undergraduate students in the fall of 1963. Even with desegregation, a designated safe space for the Black community did not exist until the Emory Black Student Union (EBSU) was established in 2013 as a response to sentiments on the absence of a shared Black space for community and programming (*Emory Black Student Union*, n.d.). The LGBTQ+ community of Emory also experienced barriers to access and equitable treatment throughout the years. The Office of LGBT Life, formerly the Office of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Student Life, was founded in 1991. Its provided resources expanded after "The Kiss" of December 1991, when two gay male students were harassed for kissing in a residence hall. When they filed a complaint for discrimination and harassment, many students and employees were dissatisfied with the university's response, leading to a protest in March 1992. The Office of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Student Life also notably excluded transgender students, leading to its renaming and expansion of resources in 1998 (*LGBT Life| History*, n.d.). Presently, the EBSU and Office of LGBT Life continue to improve their offerings with student input.

As of 2024, 12.32% of Emory's total undergraduate student population identifies as Black or African American (Eng, 2024). While there are no accurate statistics on what percentage of students identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, it is safe to assume that a much smaller percentage of the Black community identify as Black *and* queer. I chose Emory University as my research site for two reasons: convenience for acquiring interlocutors through

my connection to the Office of LGBT Life and its boasting reputation as a culturally diverse "Harvard of the South." Emory's Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (n.d.) institutional statement on diversity states:

> We welcome a diversity of gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, and disabilities, as well as racial, ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, religious, national, and international backgrounds, believing that the academic and social energy that results from such diversity is essential to advancing knowledge, addressing society's most pressing issues, and attending to the full spectrum of human needs in service to the common good.

The notion of embracing diversity is also imbued within Emory's undergraduate general education requirements (GERs). Undergraduate students are required to take two intercultural communication courses in which they study a language other than English, and a course fulfilling the Race and Ethnicity GER "provides students with opportunities to consider racial, ethnic, and cultural dynamics; political, economic and social exclusions; and social difference, inequality and identity more generally, to gain an awareness of how these affect structural inequality amongst individuals and communities" (*Race & Ethnicity GER Guidance*, n.d.).

A study published in 2021 by Illinois State University graduate student Rachel Laing on the linguistic appropriation of AAVE and LGBT language was conducted across multiple large midwestern universities. This study, which explored the correlation between a person's intercultural tolerance and the likelihood of linguistic appropriation, found that "the higher an individual scored on the intercultural tolerance scale, the lower they scored for perceived acceptability of appropriation. Thus, the more intercultural tolerance one demonstrates, the less likely they are to use appropriated language" (Laing, 2021, p. 40). With this in mind, we would expect to see an institution like Emory, one of the top 25 schools in the United States, that places

education and institutional value on increasing cultural competency and tolerance, to have very low rates of linguistic appropriation. Despite this, my interlocutors still recount stories of appropriation from their peers or admit to using appropriated language. What disconnect is causing this phenomenon? This study looks specifically at the Internet and Generation Z's culture.

CHAPTER I: What Is BQIL?

To address the role and perception of Black Queer Intersectional Language (BQIL) in Generation Z, we first have to define what BQIL *is*. As a researcher who aims to center the voices of marginalized people, my definition of BQIL will be derived from the words of my interlocutors and supported by theory and the everyday media forms they interact with. This includes their thoughts on what it is, what it is *not*, and their own examples.

This chapter seeks to define what BQIL is from the perspective of members of the source community, my Black queer interview, and focus group participants. As we will see in this chapter, BQIL seems to be understood as a subset of language within AAE that includes any term derived from or popularized by Black queer or transgender spaces and is often tied to deviant femininity regardless of the gender identity of the user. Authentic users must be Black and have connections to the queer experience, whether that be expressions of their own sexuality and gender identity or close relationships with Black queer people. Non-Black queer users of BQIL are incapable of authentic usage due to their ability to distance themselves from the Black experience and its consequences as they move through other spaces. BQIL use in non-Black queer people is often regarded as a performative caricature of particularly Black femininity that relies on an essentialized and reductive idea of depictions of strength and "fierceness" that Black femme personas are known for. In this tug of war between Blackness and queerness, the 'phantom of Blackness' tips the scales in how Black queer participants perceive BQIL and who should participate in its usage.

Bridging Gaps

A breadth of literature exists about African American English and queer language respectively, but my project aims to bridge the gap between these two. I am not arguing that African American English or queer language are understudied, but I *am* arguing that the language that comes out of the generative intersection between the two is. This project does not seek to undermine or ignore the work of seminal linguistic scholars in either field of study, as I do believe that they are foundational to this project and the literature review focuses on some of them at length, but seeks to expand upon them under a new lens that is dedicated to not only BQIL as its own language category, but specifically how members of Generation Z interpret and interact with it.

My contribution to the literature of African American English and queer language is to make the intersection between the two language forms explicit and give it a concrete name: Black Queer Intersectional Language (BQIL). I place emphasis upon it being an intersectional experience due to what Chloe O. Davis (2021) calls "double systemic attacks" on Black queer individuals due to their unique two identities that are seen as the antithesis to whiteness and heteronormativity (Davis, 2021, p. 14). I hope to elucidate what words fit into the BQIL category, what spaces they come from and are used within Generation Z, and how they have been upheld and changed throughout history. In other words, when did elements of queer language become connected to Black language and vice versa? This intersection has been under-investigated by academics, yet we know there is a clear overlap between these topics due to acknowledgment within pop culture and commercialization. According to Davis (2021), "these expressions are capitalized, monetized, branded on clothing and heard in the latest music. However, most people don't realize that these words were brought to life by...the countless

members of the Houses of Corey, Dior, Wong, Christian, Ebony, Omni (UltraOmni), and the list goes on" (Davis, 2021, p. 15). Davis is referencing some of the legendary Houses of the queer Black and Latinx Ballroom scene that were featured in *Paris Is Burning*, the 1991 documentary that shot the community and its language into the mainstream.

From my own experience, in September of 2024, I had the opportunity to have lunch with Jafari S. Allen, socio-cultural anthropologist, critical ethnographer, Black gay theorist, and currently a professor of African American and African Diaspora Studies at Columbia University. The majority of the people sitting at the long table were PhD fellows telling him about their fully fleshed-out dissertations. In contrast, the only other undergraduate fellow and I had yet to begin collecting interview data. When Professor Allen turned to ask me about my project, and I gave him the short elevator pitch I had been practicing for weeks, he skipped all the abstract and theoretical discourse that he had given the graduate students and succinctly and almost jarringly stated, "I blame NeNe Leakes and the Real Housewives franchise." Allen's response caught me so off-guard, but I found myself laughing at his assertion. As an avid Real Housewives watcher myself, specifically the predominantly Black casts of Potomac and Atlanta, I have noticed in online discourse, especially on Twitter/X, that many queer people, especially men, love the franchise and have seen NeNe Leakes, the breakout star of Real Housewives of Atlanta, used as a source of memes and reaction videos. Just to name one, the use of an infamous clip in which she visits castmate Kenya Moore's temporary housing in a part of Atlanta that is much different than the suburbia they are used to. As NeNe Leakes steps out of her car, sirens blare, and the camera pans to a MARTA public transit bus, bustling streets, and a rundown residential area. All NeNe Leakes can say as she walks down the street toward Kenya's building is," Whew, chile! The ghetto! The ghetto" (Mbakwe, 2021). It has become so popularized outside of the Black

community that one Twitter/X user, [@mrigasiramenace] garnered seventeen thousand retweets and fifty-eight thousand likes for a 2018 post saying, “non-black people are not allowed to say WOO CHILE THE GHETTO y’all gotta say sheesh guys the urban area or sum.” One user responds saying “wHY did i read it in a yt [white] man’s voicesjajsjaj” ([@mrigasiramenace], 2018). This comment likely references the gay white man’s frequent usage of the term “chile” on the platform. The executive producer and reunion host, Andy Cohen, is a white gay man, and even he comments that the show is “fashionable, it’s camp and it’s high drama. It’s all the things that gay men love” (Duncan, 2024). This viewpoint would likely never appear in a scholarly text and hinges entirely on one’s knowledge of popular culture and specific spaces.

Even my interlocutors cite their own examples of media and pop culture that have commodified and commercialized Black queerness. This stretch of dialogue features all the participants from my Black queer focus group (Fig. 1):

E: so I think like previously, most queer media was focused on queer white men. and then when we got into like *Pose*, and started giving Laverne Cox, like, you know, kind of when we're centering like queer black individuals is kind of like it- there's always kind of a [negativity
D: [n*ggativity
All: ((cackling))
E: and then I also feel like too like I keep bringing in like these huge examples. but like kind of like with Beyonce having *Renaissance*, I think it opened up [a whole new
F: [.hh speak about it
E: [path into the queer community
C: [we're in the trenches we're in the trenches
E: and I think specifically like- lOve Honey- lOve Honey [Balenciaga but I do think
B: [BUT
C: [she's not the only girl out there
E: became like the face of Renaissance but there were SO mAny people who have come before who are just as phenomenal and who have ballroom connections, culture. So I think it kind of like, you know, in the same way of like representation, it also creates the idea like you talk about gatekeeping of like there are some things that do need to just be FOR our community. Because when it becomes MAINSTREAM, it gets TORN [apart.
B: [torn to pieces

While centering Black queer individuals in the media is a positive shift in representation and diversity, it does not come without its faults, or what Eden calls "n*ggativity" (line 5). In this example, Joseline brings up FX's show *Pose* (line 2), set in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which has clear parallels to some of *Paris Is Burning*'s most jarring lore, like the unsolved murder of Venus Xtravaganza in the documentary and Candy's untimely death in the scripted series, or the mummified body stuffed in Elektra Evangelista's closet in the show and the corpse found in Dorian Corey's closet after she passed away (Beaudoin, 2021). They also reference Beyoncé's *Renaissance* album (line 8), an ode to the Black queer community's contributions to mainstream music and dance. They openly critique Beyoncé's choice to have Honey Balenciaga, a talented and well-known Puerto Rican and Honduran Ballroom performer, perform alongside her on the *Renaissance* tour (lines 12-15). They do not doubt Honey Balenciaga's capabilities or talents but

are instead frustrated that someone who identifies as African American and has been in the Ballroom scene for longer was not chosen (lines 16-18). They also critique the *Renaissance* project altogether for bringing this niche community into the mainstream like *Paris Is Burning* did decades before with adverse effects (lines 20-21).

My interaction with Allen and my Black focus group participants led me to realize that the realities of BQIL are less contingent on academic and theoretical works and, more importantly, rooted in the social context my interlocutors inhabit. While academic discourse about BQIL is important, the beliefs and practices of my participants are best understood through the lens of the news articles, memes, and pop culture references that inform their experiences in the quotidian as members of Generation Z.

'The Phantom of Blackness'

The title of this section comes from Jaylah, one of my most vocal focus group participants in conversations about the commodification and fetishization of Black people, their language, and their aesthetics. Jaylah's outspoken pro-Black queerness that will be seen throughout this project is rooted in her identity as a Harlem-born, Atlanta-raised daughter of a Caribbean-American father, who was raised by a pan-Africanist who left Barbados before they gained independence, and an African American mother whose parents tried to assimilate her into white schools in Long Island. Across all my conversations, the 'phantom of Blackness' followed me, especially in discussions of tolerance and how queer non-Black BQIL users are perceived. I expected BQIL to be at the intersection of a Venn Diagram with Black on one side and queer on the other. After talking to my interlocutors, I would consider it more like a tug-of-war, being pulled closer to one side or the other depending on who you ask, but the phantom is always there.

My peers regard BQIL as a subgenre of AAE through identity indexing and asserting tolerance levels for different users.

First Impressions Matter

This section will discuss the identity of five research participants, making it apt to open with a short biographical synopsis of who they are. Giselle is a third-year student and first-generation Ghanaian American raised in Gwinnett County, Georgia, about forty minutes from Emory. Gwinnett is the most ethnically diverse county in Georgia, but she attended predominantly Black public schools and witnessed white flight to the private Christian schools. Giselle also identifies as African American based on how they were socialized and their childhood experiences. She currently identifies as bisexual. Mari is a first-generation Indian American born and raised in Kentucky. He moved around frequently due to his parents being doctors, and the first fourteen years of his life were spent in culturally southern areas between Lexington and Louisville, Kentucky, and Gainesville, Florida, before his parents finally settled in Bethesda, Maryland, when he began high school. Even living in the South, his parents had strong connections to the South Asian diaspora, and while he went to a diverse school, his family mainly interacted with the well-established South Asian community. He is still grappling with his queer identity due to his family's religious and cultural beliefs. Mila was born and raised in predominantly white Palm Coast, Florida, to a white mother and a Honduran father. Despite being in what she describes as a "very white rich town," Mila comes from a low-income background and attended a school that was still segregated until the 1990s and continues to have a significant Black and Latinx population. She talks about experiencing primarily white friend groups that simultaneously called her the "diverse" friend due to her Hispanic heritage and

criticized her for “not being Hispanic enough” because of her physical appearance and not being fluent in the language. She came out as pansexual in seventh grade and currently identifies as bisexual. Charli is a white transmasculine person born in Hoover, Alabama. Their parents moved them to rural Alabama due to heavy racial segregation in the Hoover schools. They attended predominantly white schools, even after moving to more urban Huntsville, where they say that despite being predominantly white, “everyone” at their high school used a ‘blaccent.’ They currently identify as both polyamorous and asexual, two things they have had to grapple with, along with their race, coming from a conservative state, and have truly blossomed coming to Emory. Finally, Claire is a white bisexual woman who grew up in Pennsylvania in a predominantly white, conservative, suburban area about forty minutes outside of Philadelphia. She attended predominantly white public schools until she was homeschooled in high school. She credits how she speaks to her parents, who grew up in Philadelphia’s Polish immigrant neighborhood. Claire had the unique experience of interacting with a lot of Black people, specifically women and girls, as part of the Philadelphia Girls Choir in Center City, where she traveled four times a week for practices for much of her upbringing.

In my interviews, I consistently framed my questions using the phrase ‘non-Black people.’ Can you recount a time that you heard a non-Black person use BQIL? What differences do you perceive when a Black queer person uses BQIL versus a non-Black queer person? Despite this precaution, in my focus group and multiple interviews, including those with non-Black people of color, they often defaulted to ‘white people’ exclusively in at least one response. This caused me to question the broader notions of race in the queer community. After asking my interlocutors about their home communities, I asked them a complex and introspective question about themselves: If you had to rank your race and ethnicity, gender identity, and sexuality in

order of which is most important to you, what would you say? All of my interlocutors who identified as people of color ranked some form of their racial or ethnic identity as their top choice. Below are some of the explanations given to me:

Name	Dialogue (A=Me, B=Interlocutor)
Giselle	**B:** ((laughing)) whY wOULd yOU Ask ME thAt um for me:: (0.8) I'm gonna sa::y (1.0) race is like at the top race is at the top a::nd (0.5) like gender identity is also at the top (.) just 'cause I feel like those- I feel like you look at me and make your [assumptions **A:** [mhm **B:** and kinda treat me: (.) like (.) based off of that but I also: like personally ethnicity is very important to me so that's also up th↑ere (.) what else did you say?
Mari	**B:** so race (0.8) and then >sexuality and gender would be tied< because if it's either two or three or three or two I don't really care either way **A:** okay **B:** just because for me my life has really been in↓formed by my south Asian American identity and I think I center my viewpoint on the world through that lens (0.5) but I think also for me I say that because (2.2) I didn't struggle with that as a young kid I always knew from a young age where I came from so I didn't have to like cosplay as a twenty year old and be like 'oh my god I don't know where I'm-' I always knew where I was from. and I always held that close to me. and every year it gets stronger because I have a much more independent (0.2) connection to knowledge
Mila	**B:** okay (0.5) hmm I had to do this for a class actually and I remember sitting there and being like ((whisper scream)) um I think the most important to me is race? even with my race and ethnicity I still feel closed off in some spaces because I still just (.) I talk with my sister about this (.) like I don't know if I'll ever feel Hispanic enough because I don't know Spanish (.) even though I grew up with the culture like I don't know Spanish, I don't look Hispanic, and I don't have a great relationship with my dad so I think all of those things really tie into how I perceive myself in a space

Each of my interlocutors used some sort of metaphor to explain why their race is most important to them. Giselle stacks her identities like a pyramid in which "race is at the top...gender identity

is also at the top" (lines 2-3) due to those being the first two things people notice about her visually. While her Ghanaian American ethnicity is not at the very top because it is not so easily discernable to outsiders, it is personally important enough to make it "up there" (line 7) in this figurative pyramid. Mari uses the metaphor of a race to discuss the ranking of his identities. For him, race would be in the lead while "sexuality and gender would be tied" (line 1). His strong connection to his cultural heritage makes it something he has never struggled with (lines 9-10) and is key to how he interprets the world around him (lines 5-6). Mila is different from Giselle and Mari because she does not conceive her race as something physically apparent, like Giselle, or a point of strong cultural heritage, like Mari. Instead, race is like a doorway for Mila, one that feels "closed off" (line 4) in some spaces due to her experiences of having her Hispanic identity tokenized in some contexts and scrutinized in others. Here, Mila struggles with authenticating her Hispanic identity despite passing as white in many spaces, conveying that authenticity is not "an inherent essence, but...a social process played out in discourse" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 601). Mila struggles with how to prove that she is a rightful user of her racial and ethnic identity when she does not have some of the factors that outsiders deem as necessary like a specific appearance, a tie to the Spanish language, and a close relationship to her Hispanic parent (lines 5-8). For all three of these participants, the metaphors they use are more than just describing how they choose to rank their identities to other people; these metaphors color how they perceive and interact with those identities. This is backed by the work of Lakoff & Johnson (1981), which tells us that:

> Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is

> fundamentally metaphorical in nature...Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people." (p. 3)

This is why metaphor is ingrained in my participants' explanation of their identity, as it is a significant part of their everyday realities and the lens through which they view themselves and experience themselves in relation to others.

As all of the people of color cited above, the observable presence of their race and cultural practices, or lack thereof for Mila, makes it most important to them. For them, race seems to be this omnipresent feature that shapes their reality and how they map themselves onto the world. In the United States context, race is inscribed in the country's founding and continues to be fronted today. Race has been a point of segregation, violence, and civil rights. It is asked when you apply for jobs, on college applications, and medical forms. Racialization within the United States is inherently political, often discussed by scholars through three main historical narratives that "create the ontological assumptions that animate contemporary political conflict over race in the US" (Schmidt, 2020, p. 31). One running thread is that the contemporary racial politics of the United States has its roots in the country's founding, which was built on the idea that whiteness is the ideal. *The racial orders thesis* "rejects claims that racial injustices are aberrations in America, for it elaborates how the nation has been pervasively constituted by systems of racial hierarchy since its inception" (King & Smith, 2005, as cited in Schmidt, 2020, p. 34). Contemporarily, political scientists Desmond King and Rogers Smith argue that there are two competing institutional agendas on race in the United States: a 'white supremacist order' and a 'transformative egalitarian order.' This revelation about the entrenchment of racial hierarchy within the United States made me wonder how a white American's ranking of identity would

differ from a person of color. Charli, a white trans-masculine individual, put their race at the very bottom of the list:

Charli: of course whiteness is integral to the privilege I have and how I experience the world (.) but I am reluctant ((to)) identify with whiteness because of white nationalism (0.2) it's more a position I occupy, unpack, grapple with, and ultimately benefit from rather than a point of pride or cultural affinity

Interestingly, Charli places their gender identity as most important to them for reasons remarkably similar to why my other interlocutors emphasize their race and ethnicity.

Charli: as a transmasc person I feel like transness is the primary lens through which I view myself and the world (.) it is both the aspect of myself I find the most inspiration and joy in and the thing that makes me most vulnerable (0.5) Two sexuality ((brief explanation of their polyamorous and asexual identity)) I feel sexuality is a bit less integral to how I show up in the world than transness (0.2) like I'm less likely to elaborate or explain my identity on the basis of being poly or asexual

Here, Charli asserts that their gender identity is simultaneously what is most important to their joy and the lens through which they view the world but also is most important to them because it is a vulnerability (lines 1-3). This idea of vulnerability is unique to Charli, as my other three interlocutors' number one choice of race is not rooted in vulnerability but instead in heritage, pride, and striving for a cultural connection. Charli places their sexuality at the number two spot due to it being less of a visual marker of how they are perceived by larger society than their transness. Yet, what is most important to them is the aspect of their identity that most immediately marginalizes them based on the perception someone could build of them in the first ten seconds of seeing them. For them, their whiteness is the least salient thing to them because it is normative in the United States, so they default to the next most salient thing that would be remarked on about them. For a person of color, it would likely be their skin color or some

prominent ethnically distinguishable physical feature, but for Charli, who comes from the dominant race in the United States, it is their non-normative gender expression.

Claire, who is my other white participant, also ranks her whiteness as the least important to her, but instead of her gender identity, she ranks her bisexuality first:

1 **Claire:** bisexual is number one for sure (.) I feel like so many people are bisexual nowadays and
2 thAT's nOT- I dON't mEAN thAT as like a .hh 'oh my gosh everyone's being turned g↓ay' >but
3 just in the sense of like< a lot more people are like open and like able to be open with their
4 identity? so (.) at least socially I feel like (.) represented and like (.) there's community. last? I
5 um I- I identify as wh↑ite ((laughs)) I know shocker shocker ((sarcastic voice))

Unlike Charli, Claire's top choice does not come from a place of vulnerability and marginalization. Instead, more similarly to my interlocutors who rank their race as number one, Claire chooses her number one based on her affinity for a larger group. To Claire, "so many people are bisexual nowadays" (line 1), so she feels a sense of pride due to inclusion, understanding, and representation (line 4). Despite ranking her race as the least important to her like Charli, it seems to be for a different reason. Charli takes on a very active role when discussing their race as something they "occupy, unpack, grapple with, and ultimately benefit from" (line 3), while Claire seems to shrug it off nonchalantly with sarcasm (line 5). For Claire, her race is the least remarkable thing about her. It should also be noted that she does not verbally place her womanhood at number two, leaving it to be implied. It seems that her gender identity is not so important that she needs to spend time expressing why it is so high up on her list like her sexuality, or so insignificant that it is only part of a sarcastic joke like her race.

Tolerance

Due to the very different ranking of racial importance and its immediacy to the lens in which they view the world, all of my Black queer interlocutors had the lowest tolerance for white

people, queer or non-queer, who use AAE and BQIL. The first thing that my interlocutors did in their focus group discussion of tolerance, is postulate about why non-Black queer people use BQIL in the first place, especially with the prominence of anti-Blackness within the queer community and society at large. What do they accomplish by using it? Here is how they respond:

1 **B:** it's just like they love the phantom of blackness, like the figure, but not the actual
2 black person.
3 **B:** but I saw like I can compare it to black queer language because they especially when
4 it comes to queer men, especially queer white [men.
5 **F**: [mmm wake it up
6 **C:** [o::h
7 **B:** I don't know. Why do they like- [the soul of a Black woman just rises out of them
8 **F:** [wake it up. wake it up
9 **E:** and that's why I was like, what do they associate? and I think you kinda answered that
10 by saying like fierceness or like a you know- or maybe it's 'cause they view black- do
11 they view black women as like a peak representation of femininity?
12 **E:** but then at the same time, [I know that
13 **C:** [no::
14 **D:** [no::
15 **E:** that's not true
16 **D:** I think they see it as a peak version of like deviant [femininity
17 **F:** [yes
18 **D:** like I don't actually think they feel that black women are fully feminine, which is why they
19 feel like...[comfortable
20 **C:** [like doing it

And thus, this omnipresent 'phantom of Blackness' began to follow me, with its beginnings in the disingenuous queer white man. Jaylah critiques white queer men for their use of BQIL, arguing that the "soul of a Black woman just rises out of them" (lines 4-7). Jaylah conceptualizes their use of the language as a possession in which a Black femme lexicon comes out of a disjointed white body. Joseline then postulates why they do it, ultimately connecting it to a "fierceness" (line 10) that Black women are known to embody. Eden then goes on to add that they believe these men are comfortable portraying these Black femme personas because they do not conceptualize Black women to be entirely women, similar to themselves, but to have

feminine qualities that they wish to showcase (lines 18-19). Studies of linguistic phenomena of *stylization* and *enregisterment* support the observations of my interlocutors. In this case, enregisterment is the vehicle that makes stylization possible because it makes linguistic forms ideologically related to social identities. Stylizations are "moments of speech where speakers produce 'specially marked and often exaggerated representations of languages, dialects, and styles that lie outside their own habitual repertoire'" (Rampton, 2009, as cited in LeBlanc, 2021). Ilbury (2019) defines enregisterment as the following:

> Essentialized personifications of the imagined typical user, linked with non-linguistic attributes, such as social class, conduct, and other mental and aesthetic qualities. Thus, in deploying a specific linguistic feature, the user can evoke the characterological figure(s) associated with that style and capitalize on its interactional potential. (para. 22)

For stylized speech to have significance in everyday conversation and be understood as a projection of an identity or an idea that appears to be distinct from identity groups that a user belongs to, they must first become enregistered. Enregisterment is a product of our daily interactions, the media we see, and how certain speech styles are linked to specific groups, activities, and prominent figures through repetitive actions and exposures (LeBlanc, 2021). Speech styles that have been enregistered and stylized then go on to be employed to index aspects of one's identity. In the case of Ilbury's 2019 orthographic Twitter study, "Sassy Queens," effeminate white gay men using AAE associated with Black women in online spaces to perform and index their confident feminine identity. Their use of stylized words like 'lawd,' 'gurl,' and 'werk,' relies on the enregistered idea that Black women are sassy and fierce, qualities that they want to convey about themselves. In this way, queer non-Black AAE and BQIL users are perceived by my Black interlocutors as being possessed by the 'phantom of

Blackness.' Ilbury's study supports the idea of the *emergence principle* which views identity as the product of linguistic practice rather than the source (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p.588). When asked if queer non-Black people suffer the same stigma as Black AAE and BQIL users, Orion had a similar interpretation of language use and the *emergence principle* when discussing code-switching in white queer people:

1 **Orion:** it's like the whole it's just a phase mentality that's what it is mhm like you just
2 wanna be down or hip or whatever but that's not (0.5) it's like a costume you could just
3 put it on and take it off (0.5) it's like oh you might wanna act you know (.) like you're the
4 same as all these people (.) but you kno:w (.) that job that your daddy lined up for you it's
5 still gon' be there you'll just like shed the skin and go be you know?

Orion's interpretation of language as a costume to be taken on and off depending on the context (lines 2-3) demonstrates that language has active agency in performing aspects of gender and sexuality rather than being a passive consequence of a prescribed identity.

In contrast with the least tolerance being given to white BQIL users, some of my Black queer participants expressed greater tolerance for Black heterosexual BQIL users than any non-Black queer group, even inviting them to use the language:

D: I feel like even if you're not queer, I feel like black people have access to it ((‘it’= the BQIL repertoire)) because they're affected in the same way by gender dynamics, like similarly
B: I mean, I feel like when we talk about hh when we talk about cis black men it's really a lot of times it's used in the same way of like ‘I'm making fun’ that’s my thing so like when you asked that question, I was thinking primarily about black women, but cis men is just, that's a whole ‘nother
D: I feel like if they're like being genuine
E: okay
D: because it's like, the reason why I say it shouldn't be like that but it is is because like you were saying with cishet black men, when they're using it, it is mostly in a mocking way so when they're using it and it's genuine, it's like, it makes me question like, what ties do you have to that language to make you mean that it's like serious?
E: yeah
D: like are you involved in the community? or are you just really close with like female black figures around you, to where you actually respect that language? And then it's like, it is kind of rare for them to like, call me a queen and then not use it in a mocking way, that's why it makes me think like, yeah, we see each other, you know?
E: right right it’s about being genuine, about being authentic
F: yes::
E: are you using the language authentically? I think that's the thing, it can be used, but like you said, most of the time it's being used and not authentic at all.

In this excerpt, my interlocutors wrestle with how to authenticate BQIL users. Eden argues that all Black people, regardless of sexuality or gender identity, should be able to use BQIL (lines 1-3). Their willingness to allow heterosexual Black people to use BQIL is rooted in Black solidarity and group cohesion, which many Black people believe is necessary to achieving social equality (Shelby, 2005, pp. 201-202). Eden supports their position by talking about the shared Black experience of stereotyped gender dynamics (line 2), an example being a study published in 2022 by G. Perusi Benson and Vanessa Volpe involving a survey conducted using twelve “target” or standardized photos of Black and white people assigned male and female at birth. This study found that “Black male targets were perceived to be more heterosexual than White male targets, Black female targets were perceived as less heterosexual than White female targets, and Black

targets were perceived as more masculine than White targets" (Benson & Volpe, 2022). Hypermasculinity in Black men in the United States has its foundations in slavery where the Black male body was objectified and commoditized (Milton, 2012, p.19). Hypermasculinity in Black women is rooted in anti-Black feminism and transphobia in which white femininity is viewed as the peak everyone should strive for and the antithesis to the Black woman who is stereotyped as loud, abrasive, and hyper-independent, all the things that a feminine woman should not be (Blake, 2022). Thus, Black people in the United States are exposed to the same gendered system that privileges white people. However, as we see with Jaylah's apprehension and refusal to agree on the point of Black solidarity (lines 4-7), when it comes to BQIL, "there are, of course, critics who think such solidarity irrational, impractical, and even morally objectionable" (Shelby, 2005, p. 201). This seems to be the one point of contention between my Black queer interlocutors when it comes to tolerance of outsiders using BQIL. Is it Blackness that provides the rite of passage to use the language, or is it even more exclusive than that? Jaylah is more likely to agree with Eden's argument if the scope is narrowed to only cisgender heterosexual Black women (lines 4-7). This seems to speak to Eden's earlier argument that non-Black queer people who use BQIL and Black women's AAE see them as a model of peak deviant femininity (line 16, p. 44). To Jaylah, cisgender heterosexual men are incapable of displaying this femininity *genuinely*. The authenticity of BQIL, specifically in masculine cisgender heterosexual Black men, must be traced back to an intimate connection to Black femme people, regardless of their sexuality (lines 15-16). Either way, Blackness seems to be a foundational piece to how BQIL is defined and interpreted as nowhere in this talk section or any other do they discuss ways that a non-Black person's BQIL use can be authenticated. It seems that heterosexual Black BQIL users have the ability to use the language authentically via proximity to

Black queer and femme people but often do not (lines 21-22). In contrast, as will be discussed next chapter, non-Black queer BQIL users do not have the ability to be authentic users of the language regardless of how connected and educated they are on Black queer spaces.

BQIL in Generation Z

'I-Generation-Phone' Z

As Kevin Aviance pointed out on the nightclub floor in 2012, this generation of queer people is unlike its predecessors (Allen, 2021, p. 28). The same observation can be applied unanimously to the entire generation. What separates Generation Z from those that came before? The most important thing is access to modern technology, specifically the Internet. Members of Generation Z are often regarded as the "digital natives" born into a technological boom. In contrast, millennials are seen as the digital sphere's pioneers, experiencing both a world at its peak in technological innovation and a life before (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021). Members of Generation Z are experiencing an unseen level of connectivity across states, time zones, and continents, and this significantly affects queer youth who spend an average of five hours per day online, which is roughly 45 minutes more than their heterosexual counterparts (GLSEN, 2013). One of my interlocutors, Claire, talks about how influential social media was for her upbringing in a conservative household within a Polish immigrant community in the suburbs outside of Philadelphia:

Claire: I would sa::y? (0.2) I don't use Twitter (.) and I haven't in y↓ears but when I was younger (.) like a younger teen I used Twitter (0.5) >I still stand by< like (.) joining online queer spaces when I was younger (0.2) I mean I didn't even- I was raised in like (.) a Catholic, conservative househ↓old. I didn't even really know like (.) what LGBTQ really was before like (.) using the internet and like online spaces (0.8) once I was exposed to those spaces and started (.) like (.) intergrating into like queer spaces online I was exposed to a lot more like (0.2) social j↓ustice and like through that was made more aware of like stuff like AAVE and appropriation of like language

As Claire points out, internet usage is a large part of engaging with and actively shaping our social realities (lines 4-6). While social media platforms like Myspace and even Facebook are being called outdated, youth still significantly interact with people of various groups via the internet. This project examines three platforms, Instagram, Twitter/X, and TikTok, and the trends within them that my interlocutors referenced throughout our conversations as both active participants and commentators.

The Gen Z Lexicon

BQIL is only a fraction of what is more broadly known as "Gen Z slang." If you compare Gen Z's list of catchy phrases to that of its predecessors, it is "quantitatively different. There seems to be much more of it, and the life cycles of Gen Z slang terms seem much more abbreviated than their Gen X or Boomer counterparts" (Rett, 2023, para. 6). Thanks to the ever-evolving internet, as soon as a word or phrase starts trending on social media, it gets replaced by something new. So, while Gen Z's codex is significantly longer, it also tends to be extremely short-lived, although there are a few exceptions of words with historical longevity. This is why words from previous generations like "boujee/bougie" and "woke" stand alongside newer phrases like "girl math" and "menty b" (Baucom, 2025). I asked my interview participants what they knew Gen Z slang to be, and Mari's answer stood out to me most:

Mari: I mean to me it's all AAVE but yeah I mean (0.2) people who aren't friends with Black people probably wouldn't understand that and when they are friends with them they're token Black friends (0.2) or Black people who have internalized racism and separate themselves from AAVE so it's like (.) to me "Gen Z slang" ((air quotes)) is the equivalent of (.) it's another filter or another reality of saying AAVE used by Gen Z folks (.) I can't think of a single w↓ord in Gen Z slang that's not from that Black language (0.2) and if there are words (0.2) prove me otherwise that they're used every single day because I cannot think of a single one unfortunately (.) in our lexicon

Mari's air quotes on "Gen Z slang" (line 4) indicate an opinion of falsehood for this language's name. Mari treats "Gen Z slang" as a euphemism for African American Vernacular English. For Mari, "Gen Z slang" is not a genuine concept and instead is a mask, or as he describes it, a "filter" used to justify using Black language in everyday speech for non-Black people without calling it by its name (lines 4-6). Khalil Greene, known as the "Gen Z Historian" on TikTok and who was featured in *The New York Times* "Up Next" series in 2021 and *Forbes* for his educational activism, remarks that "many of the phrases, terms, and diction popularized by Black Americans…floated around our communities for a long time before they found their way to the internet" (Greene [@khalilgreene], 2022). Since my Black queer interlocutors view BQIL as part of the larger AAE umbrella, the words of Mari and Greene both apply.

Examples of BQIL

I decided to zoom in on BQIL within the scope of Generation Z. What words and phrases are prevalent in Gen Z's Black queer scene? What words are being co-opted into other spaces? As a brainstorming activity, I asked my Black queer focus group participants to list words that they believe have roots in Black queer spaces. This list was then applied to all of my one-on-one interviews, where I asked my interlocutors where they believed these words stem from, where they hear them the most, and from whom. I did not reveal the source of these words or my focus group's beliefs on their Black queer underpinnings until this activity was over to avoid bias. My interlocutor, Claire, interjected before we began to give her hypothesis on this activity:

Claire: can I say in advance I think it's all a trick question I think it's all created by black queer individuals ((laughs)) like the p ↑ipeline is often just like (0.2) black? (0.2) or black q↓ueer, and appropriation by the white g↓ays (.) and then introduction to modern like (.) language (.) or vernacular.

By discussing the idea of a linguistic "pipeline" (line 2), Claire is already orienting us toward a complex "crossover" that seems comparable to a game of telephone in which Black queer people come up with a word, pass it on to another group, who then passes it on to another, and eventually we arrive at the word becoming mainstream. Claire's use of "modern" (line 3) should also be noted as it gestures toward the idea that Black and Black queer language that is used contemporarily have historical roots and are not novel ideas, which we will see in some of the word origins in the table below (Fig. 4). This table lists the phrases that my Black queer focus group participants considered to be BQIL, an all-encompassing definition that summarizes what my interlocutors define these words as, their ideas of origin, users, and where they see these words, and finally, where and who these words originated from via scholarly sources:

Word/Phrase	**Participant-derived definition**	**Their Exposure/Perception of Origin**	**Scholarly Sources on the Origin**
purr	A variation of the word 'period' which was popularized by the City Girls. Used at the end of an interaction to express approval.	**Origin:** Washington DC or southern Black cities **Exposure:** TikTok, Twitter, in-person Black spaces, in-person queer spaces **Notable Users** o queer Black people o non-queer cisgender Black women o queer non-Black people (less frequently)	Black disabled internet personality Rolling Ray, Washington DC Native, earliest online reference I found was 2020 on TikTok ([@prettyboydae], 2020).
slay*	A "signifier" and stamp of approval, often means that something is going exceptionally well or someone is doing a good job at something.	**Origin:** Black queer Ballroom **Exposure:** Twitter, Instagram, in-person general queer spaces **Notable Users** o white queer people o non-queer cisgender white women	Black and Latinx queer Ballroom, popularized and entered mainstream culture for the first time in 1991 film *Paris is Burning* (von Aspen, 2022).
gag/gagged	Gag: to stun or amaze someone, Gagged: to be shocked or amazed	**Origin:** Black queer spaces **Exposure:** Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, in-person Black queer spaces **Notable Users**	Black queer Ballroom, popularized and entered mainstream culture via *Paris is Burning*

	by someone or something.	○ queer Black people ○ queer white people (less frequently + wrong contexts)	(@gayemagazine, 2024).
tea	Secret information or gossip.	**Origin:** Black or Black queer spaces **Exposure:** in-person Black queer spaces, TikTok, Twitter **Notable users** ○ queer Black people ○ non-queer Black people ○ non-Black queer people	Black drag culture, one of the earliest print examples: 1994 nonfiction bestseller *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* by John Berendt in an interview with Black drag queen The Lady Chablis (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b).
ate	To do a superb job at something.	**Origin:** Black queer space **Exposure:** Twitter, TikTok, in-person Black queer spaces **Notable Users** ○ queer Black people ○ non-queer Black people ○ non-Black queer people ○ non-queer non-Black people	Believed to have originated in the Black Ballroom and drag scene in the 2000s and popularized via social media (Jones, 2024).
trade*	A descriptor for a queer man who presents masculine and heterosexually	**Origin:** Black non-queer or Black queer spaces **Exposure:** in-person Black queer spaces, TikTok **Notable Users** ○ Black queer people ○ non-queer cisgender Black women	Originated in 19th century Polari language of the British gay subculture, became popular in ‘80s and ‘90s Black Ballroom culture (Rude, 2024).
read	To assess and insult someone in a highly performative way.	**Origin:** Black queer Ballroom and drag spaces **Exposure:** in-person queer spaces **Notable Users** ○ all queer people ○ non-queer cisgender Black women	Black queer and Latinx Ballroom spaces in the ‘80s, popularized by *Paris is Burning* (Thorpe, 2015).
clock/ ‘clock it’	To observe, take note of something, or speak on an observation.	**Origin:** Black queer spaces **Exposure:** TikTok **Notable Users** ○ queer Black people ○ non-queer Black people	Documented under this meaning as early as 1929 in *The New Partridge Dictionary of American Slang*,

			popularized by the transgender community in Ballroom and drag spaces to refer to how "passing" someone's gender is (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a).
chopped	Disqualified from a competition or unfit to participate in the first place.	**Origin:** Black queer Ballroom spaces **Exposure:** TikTok, Instagram **Notable Users** o Black queer people	Popularized in U.S. Black queer Ballroom culture via *Paris is Burning* before making its way to mainstream culture (Randolph, 2025).
chile*	A tonal word that takes on different meanings depending on the context, a term of camaraderie or endearment.	**Origin:** Southern AAE Exposure: TikTok, Instagram **Notable Users** o non-queer cisgender Black women o Black queer people o white queer people	Southern dialectal African American English, exact date origin unknown but was notably included in the broadway play *The Wiz* in 1978 (White, 2024).
mother	Originally referred to a House matriarch in Ballroom, now used to describe iconic celebrities.	**Origin:** unspecified queer spaces **Exposure:** in-person Black queer spaces, TikTok, Twitter **Notable users** o Black queer people o non-Black queer people	Black queer Ballroom culture, first brought into the mainstream via *Paris is Burning* (Kesslen, 2023).

*=word/phrase has experienced a significant context shift according to my interlocutors

Fig. 4: List of BQIL examples, participant-derived list of definitions, origins, places of exposure, and users

The only word listed above that comes from recent years is Rolling Ray's "purr," but even that term has roots in another word that was coined decades ago by the Black queer subculture. Scholarly sources and media outlets attribute seven of the eleven words in the list to Black queer Ballroom culture of the '80s and '90s which were brought into the mainstream spotlight for the first time via Jennie Livingston's 1991 documentary *Paris Is Burning*. Interestingly, "trade" which my interlocutors exclusively associate with use by Black queer people and heterosexual, cisgender Black women, has roots in the predominantly white British gay subculture centuries

before. Conversely, “slay,” which has roots in the Black queer Ballroom scene, is almost entirely associated with whiteness. Finally, even though my interlocutors may have been exposed to these words in different ways, each word has some sort of significant social media presence that all of my interlocutors have interacted with as consumers, whether that be TikTok, Instagram, or Twitter/X. Social media and the internet seem to be a defining feature in how these words are making their way outside of niche communities and into the public sphere, which we will explore for the rest of this chapter.

Crossovers and Context Shifts

A number of the words listed above have experienced context shifts due to the “crossover” phenomenon according to my participants. Smitherman (1998) defines crossover as “the out-migration of Black culture” (p. 239). Black culture, which includes language, finds its ways into other groups and sometimes loses its community-specific meaning. In this section, I want to focus on two BQIL phrases specifically: slay and trade, the first due to the unintended but most significant context shift it experienced after going mainstream, and trade due to a Black queer person’s intentional push toward a contextual shift for a powerful message. Below are two comments on “slay” being on the list of BQIL examples:

Giselle: I don’t use slay (0.5) if ever. where do I think it came fro:m? I don’t know if that’s Black but it might be-I feel like that might be more queer than Black but I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s like a cross between the two but I just don’t hear a lot of black people say slay. I hear a lot of white (.) quEER pEople sAY sLAY that’s why I say it’s [more queer than anything

Mari: slay unfortunately has been codified in the white girl language and it's kind of a signifier of like (.) you know you're being with the girls .hh it's also very common in like internet dialect but obviously like same thing same origin probably most hundred percent likely Black queer spaces I'm sure ballroom spaces have an influence on it u::m so origins? the origin one hundred percent no doubt Black queer spaces Ballroom spaces um spaces where Black queer culture was able to thr↑ive and uh now who uses it? I would say a lot of white women use it and because of white women using it I would say a lot of non-Black women will use it as well as a cod- like a signifier of femininity and affirming femininity because oftentimes it's like maybe girls or women slaying they're gorgeous they're looking amazing um I'm sure it's being used in queer Black sp↑aces? and maybe in specifically more accurate terms I'm sure because it's been taken out of context .hh

I argue that "slay" had the most significant context shift of all the words in the BQIL list, considering it is the only phrase where Blackness is no longer associated with it. Instead, the notable users are the exact antithesis of Blackness: white queer people and non-queer cisgender white women (Fig. 4). Despite its Ballroom roots, "slay" has crossed over and transcended social media platforms, race, sexuality, gender, and age groups (von Aspen, 2022). Giselle uniquely refuses to assign "slay" to one category or another, instead putting it on a spectrum between Black and queer in a game of tug-of-war where the queer team is in the lead (line 2). Something about the loss of its Black roots projects the word toward being associated with whiteness; for Giselle, it is through white queer people (line 4), and for Mari, it is now "codified in the white girl language" (line 1). Interestingly, their remarks support Claire's earlier theorization of a linguistic pipeline that goes from Black queer space to white queer space to the general language sphere. Mari's assertion about "accurate" usage only being possible in the Black queer spaces that the language originated in (lines 9-11) connects back to my Black queer interlocutors' ideas of tolerance within BQIL language usage for various groups based on a connection that not only dictates how *accurate* their language use is, but as we will see next chapter, how *authentic* it is. However, Giselle's inability to identify with the word as a Black queer individual, or even

confidently say that it has roots in the space, tells us that “these words are sometimes used incorrectly, causing the Black queer community to feel a loss of ownership” (Davis, 2021, p. 16).

Months after our one-on-one interview, Mari sent a video to my TikTok DMs without explanation. I was immediately drawn in by the thumbnail that read, “i popularized ‘dl trade’ & it was a social experiment” above a Black person’s head. In the video, Essence, a Black transgender woman attending Columbia University who boasts over fifty thousand followers on TikTok, talks about how she got her intended results when popularizing the term “DL trade” when she says, “It proved my theory correct that Black trans women give so much to the culture only for it to be whitewashed...I was very clever when I put ‘DL’ and ‘trade’ together because they mean two separate things. They do not work together.” ([@sayessence], 2025). Essence is referencing the somewhat oxymoronic definitions of “DL” and “trade,” in which a DL man publicly identifies as straight and would be highly secretive about his homosexuality. In contrast, a “trade” willingly engages in homosexual activity but physically present as straight and outwardly masculine (Rude, 2024). In calling someone a “DL trade,” you are describing someone who must impossibly be simultaneously open and closed off in discussing and presenting their homosexuality. There is also an essential racial factor to labeling someone a “DL trade.” Essence points out how both ‘DL’ and ‘trade’ are used by the Black community to describe Black men, so when specifically white people pick it up, it does not fit the context, and as she captions on the video, “it’s completely lost its meaning” ([@sayessence], 2025). When I asked my non-Black interlocutors what “trade” meant, none knew, except for Mari, who said he

had recently learned what it meant from some of his Black friends:

Mari: um oh yeah so this word I just learned because I (.) was not really understanding what it meant and I still don't understand what it means because like I'm also confused (.) but also to me it shows (.) by me not understanding it shows a lot about my view of sexuality and gender .hh and other folks view on sexuality and gender (0.5) so from what I've asked and I mainly ask my Black friends my girlfriends and my Black queer friends or my Black queer girlfriends you kno::w ya::s hunty s↓o what from what I've heard trade is someone who presents as stra:ight but will (.) do sexual acts with queer men? because non-Black folks are not using it and non-queer Black folks have just started using it but are mis-using it so I was conf↑used so me understanding it one hundred percent lies within the queer Black community and I think also like Black women also use it too 'cause they're probably like referring to that and also they're in community with many queer Black folks .hh now in terms of who it's being used by the most? definitely Black folks queer Black folks, Black women who are straight, honestly no shade um and then probably like Black adjacent queer folks who have a lot of Black friends and are learning the language you know?

Mari's understanding of "trade" supports Essence's theory in two ways: the "phantom of Blackness" at the root of the concept and its loss of meaning after the crossover. Mari credits his understanding of the term to his Black queer and non-queer friends who have connections to the scene (line 5). He also emphasizes how only the Black queer community understands and applies its true meaning (lines 8-9). In this excerpt, Mari also traces his understanding of the linguistic pipeline that the term underwent: "queer Black folks, Black women who are straight...then probably like Black adjacent queer folks who have a lot of Black friends" (lines 12-13). We will get to know Mari more deeply in the next chapter, but he considers himself to be Black adjacent in the spaces he traverses at Emory, and thus, this pipeline is how he understands the path "trade" took to get to him. Although Mari is not white, he recognizes how "trade," and thus "DL trade," will never make complete sense to him or be used correctly because he is not part of the community it was intended to describe, which is precisely the point Essence aims to make in her TikTok. Rather than being frustrated by what has happened, Essence pokes fun at it, revealing,

"You [white queer people using "DL trade"] look fucking stupid. This has all been a fun game of telephone for me" ([@sayessence], 2025). Essence once again ties this language crossover back to the game of telephone I conceptualized and the linguistic pipeline that Claire referenced at the beginning of this section. With "slay," Black queer people unknowingly participate in a game of telephone that, by the end of it, the 'phantom of Blackness' message is incoherent or lost, while with "trade," a Black queer person decides to take active agency in starting the game and altering the message.

The Double-Edged Sword

While the internet and social media have many positive connotations, especially when accessing information or building community, both of which Claire cites earlier in this chapter, it is not entirely a productive space. When I asked my interlocutors if they believe the internet and social media is a positive entity for the queer community, I noticed an ambivalence:

Luna: I feel like just like (.) like the a- okay I feel like it's like good and bad. like I think like the access to like this type of information um (0.2) does make it a bit worse because of the fact that like people can like literally learn anything and use it like to their own advantage or like to hurt others and stuff like that? u:m but also like of course the access is good because like it connects like so many people and like it helps us learn things that like we never- we probably would've never learned if not for the internet and stuff like that? so I think just like the access to the internet and access to so many like words, vocabulary, the way that people speak is a double-edged sword

Mari: a positive you can be exposed to people and learn things if you have that mindset but negative if you are not critically analyzing what you're watching and you're not (.) if you use it for the wrong purposes it really is a dangerous sword it's a double-edged sword but oftentimes one edge is heavier because people are not looking at the other side and they're not using it for the other side and also because (.) because appropriation can now be done at a way quicker rate on the internet especially with like algorithmic bubbles people are not gonna realize that at all so definitely a lot more negative? but there are positives and we have to like utilize those positives somehow

Both Luna and Mari use the same metaphor of the "double-edged sword" (Luna, line 8; Mari, line 3). Luna repeatedly discusses this idea of "access" to information (line 2, line 4, line 6, line 7). She dedicates most of her answer to the positive connotations of "access" as she views the internet as a place of entry into spaces that we may never be able to get into elsewhere. which she views as positive overall, but she also challenges the positive connotations of "access" and leads us to question intentionality and who has the right to observe certain online spaces (lines 3-4). Unlike Luna, Mari views the internet as a predominantly negative place (line 3, line 7). To him, it is only positive if you go into it with a mindset of looking beyond what is presented to you and "critically analyzing what you're watching" (line 2). He feels that most people do not enter the digital sphere with that mindset, which, alongside "algorithmic bubbles" (line 6), leads them to appropriate language and culture from other spaces without even realizing it. Mari is not the only one who brings up this concept of the "algorithmic bubble." Mila explains why she assumes all "Gen Z slang" is queer:

Mila: um I think with social media I kinda assume everything is queer? maybe because of the lens that I've crafted like my TikTok page, and my Instagram page, and my Twitter feed when I was on there but yeah I think I definitely saw it as queer? I don't think I ever saw it as specifically Black and queer

Through the videos Mila has interacted with via likes, comments, reposts, and shares, she crafts a "lens" (line 2) that caters to her specific interests. Social media apps use this to determine her algorithm and predominantly show content that most likely fits her interests. This causes a very skewed view of social media trends and conversations in which you are mostly exposed to groups of like-minded individuals. These spaces, which Mari called "algorithmic bubbles," are more widely known as "echo chambers" (Hall Jamieson & Capella, 2008). These isolated communities "tend to be formed or occupied by niche opinion and interest groups who engage

little with wider civic debate, nor with different points of view" (Bouvier, 2020, p. 108). Interestingly, while Luna and Mari both think critically about the internet and how people can interact with its contents in the context of the interview setting, they both also admit to appropriating BQIL to varying degrees. Although they will both be explored more in the next chapter, it leads me to wonder how someone who is also an avid internet user like them and does not appropriate the language would rationalize it. When I asked Claire, a self-proclaimed retired chronic Twitter user, why she does not appropriate the language, she answered with the following:

Claire: but like, the difference? (0.5) I'm trying to think of (.) like (.) why I think I ended up with that result, where other people who are in, like, white queer spaces online (.) or just queer spaces online (.) ended up appropriating language and it might just be like, I don't know (0.2) Hm:: (0.5) I th↑ink it was probably the like >resources and communities< that I sought out when I was younger (0.2) because I wanted a more holistic approach to communities and like queer spaces, and I learned about like (.) intersectionality and intersectional feminism and >stuff like that< so it might be that contrast where like (0.2) I specifically sought out communities to educate and learn (0.5) whereas a lot of queer people who appropriate the language don't necessarily seek out communities or if they do seek it out, like community center, or, like, in agreeance with them.

Like Mari, Claire also discusses how echo chambers impact a lot of her queer peers and how they interact with online spaces (lines 8-9). However, I would argue that Claire isn't immune to echo chambers either, she just sought out educatory social justice communities that taught her "intersectionality and intersectional feminism" (line 6). Since people in Claire's echo chambers actively take a stance on either not using BQIL or educating people on its historical importance, Claire has learned since she first joined Twitter as a twelve-year-old that she should avoid using it and is consistently affirmed by the community that she interacts with. When we put the sentiments of Luna, Mari, and Mila together, we reach the consensus that the internet provides us with the unique opportunity to interact across space and time, which can be positive but also becomes the exact mechanism by which BQIL and other lexicons are repurposed and reinsulated

within another group. This phenomenon is not limited to the digital landscape. The next chapter explores three case studies of Emory students Boots, Luna, and Mari, who show how the internet bleeds into our reality to varying degrees of tolerance by my Black queer participants.

What It Is and Is Not: Conclusion

This chapter defined what Black Queer Intersectional Language (BQIL) is and what it is not through the voices of my interlocutors. BQIL is treated as a section within the larger African American English (AAE) lexicon that includes phrases created, coined, and popularized by Black queer individuals across time. Black cisgender and heterosexual users with close proximity to Black queer people and Black femmes have the ability to authentically and genuinely use BQIL without being viewed as appropriators of the language. In contrast, non-Black people, queer or non-queer, will never be able to authentically use the language in the eyes of my Black participants due to their distance from the Black experience. Overall, Blackness seems to be a heavy deciding factor in how this language is perceived and who should participate in its use. BQIL is a language that traverses generations and continues to evolve and be brought into mainstream culture. BQIL is *not* "Gen Z slang" and has historical roots. BQIL is also not an immovable monolith; words are constantly changing in their contexts thanks to active agents and social media.

CHAPTER II: Student Case Studies

This chapter explores the matter of authenticity in BQIL use through case studies of three students who appropriate the language and would be considered inauthentic users by my Black queer interlocutors. Two students, Boots and Mari, are specifically pointed out or condemned by other participants in the study for their BQIL usage. However, only one student, Mari, possesses an acute awareness of their BQIL usage and problematic perception in Black queer spaces, while the other is not. Luna is unique in the fact that her candid use of BQIL does not face the large-scale negative backlash that is seen with Boots and Mari. This stems from Luna's use of BQIL as a means of consistent self-expression rather than a doorway to stake claim in Black queer space like Boots and Mari. While Boots' appropriation is will be told through the eyes of a Black queer interlocutor, Mari and Luna were both interviewed in this project and given full agency in establishing their relationship to BQIL as appropriators.

Authenticity

What is considered to be authentic BQIL, and thus, authentic identity performance? My Black queer focus group participants drew a divisive line between having knowledge of and participating in a community and having a genuine *connection* to it. My Black queer participants bring up this idea of connectivity as what Jaylah calls the "ancestral universal connection":

B: and especially when you're talking about like black people, like you can't because the connection is there. like I believe in like ancestral universal connection so like the connection is there. but you don't have to be like 'oh, my gosh, I know everything about it.' but you can't tell a black person (0.2) that's like- you can't tell a black person what's racist or not
D: [literally
F: [mm
E: [right

Jaylah believes that she does not have to show an all-encompassing knowledge of Black queer space to authenticate herself or justify talking about or interacting with it because her credibility is already established through the "ancestral universal connection" (line 2) that is only possible with the intersectional Black queer identity. In other words, they do not have to build credibility in the space via knowledge and associations (line 3) with others because it is already given to them, specifically through their *racial* identity. Jaylah, and my other Black queer interlocutors who agree with the "ancestral universal connection" stance, speak to the words of Kevin Aviance in this project's introduction. Although they identify as part of this 'i-generation-phone' contemporary time, they still respect and acknowledge the lineage of language and Black queer culture that was established before them. Even if they cannot explicitly trace themselves back to a specific House Mother or House Father like Aviance can, they still connect and relate themselves to their Black queer predecessors. For the rest of this chapter, I will equate Jaylah's "ancestral universal connection" to a genuine one that allows BQIL use in the eyes of my Black queer participants.

The three students, Boots, Mari, and Luna that this chapter focuses on are judged by other participants as not utilizing BQIL genuinely because they miss this key connection, as despite being queer, they miss the essential Black racial component. Instead, they are read as inauthentic and disconnected users of BQIL. I conceptualize Boots and Mari as existing on separate ends of a spectrum of BQIL co-optation from incognizant to hyperaware. The uniting factor between these two students is that they face backlash because of their BQIL usage. Interestingly, Luna, who is also conscious of her BQIL appropriation, does not. Although her BQIL usage is still not authentic because she is non-Black, it is deemed more acceptable and she does not experience

any backlash. The rest of this chapter explores these three students as archetypes of BQIL appropriators and what causes Black queer people to react to them differently.

Boots The House Down

To demonstrate an example of a BQIL appropriator who is not self-aware of their use of appropriated language or how Black queer students perceive them, I will use Eden's debate with Boots. Eden is a first-year student from the suburbs of Houston, Texas, who identifies as a first-generation Gambian American but also references their ties to African American culture. Since they were born, Eden has been raised and socialized around African Americans and their culture and even remarks on experiencing the same hateful terms used against African Americans. Eden frequently argues against the unproductive disagreements that arise in the Black community based on ethnic superiority, cultural differences, and historical disputes, better known as the "diaspora wars." Eden is not afraid of confrontation, as a member of the high school and college debate team, and has found themselves in two debates in the Emory identity spaces. The first was the interaction with Boots in the Office of LGBT Life, while the other was in the Emory Black Student Union (EBSU) on diaspora wars. Both debates were witnessed and intervened upon by Jaylah. Boots is an East Asian American cisgender queer man from an Atlanta suburb who frequents the Office of LGBT Life. I have chosen to name him Boots based on a segment of talk from Eden's story below:

1 **D:** did you see the boots? his atrocious boots. get rid of them [immediately.
2 **E:** [baby (0.2) they be talking
3 **E:** about chopped them boots is chopped=
4 **D:** =it's chopped it's [so bad
5 **B:** [torn to pieces

Joseline's use of the term 'chopped' (line 3) which comes from the list of Black queer participant-derived BQIL words from the last chapter, is a targeted and intentional choice of words. Not only does it refer to the infamous and subjectively gaudy black patent leather platform boots that Boots is known for, but it also references part of Eden's retelling of their debate that my interlocutors took particular offense to. Eden orients us to how this entire debate started below:

1 **D:** when I got into an argument with this person they were like- they were talking about how like
2 reading is not a black thing [and how it's a-
3 **F:** [hEllO:?
4 **D:** yeah and then they were like 'you looked chopped as [soon as you came into the building'
5 **B:** [cho:pped?
6 **C:** ch↑opped?

Eden tells us that this whole debate began over the origins of the act of reading someone (lines 1-2). In queer spaces like Ballroom and drag, reading is "the art of ritual insult...performed with a distinct rhythmic style that cues to the listener that the speaker has shifted into a more highly performative frame" (Calder, n.d.). While Eden argues that it originated in Black queer space, Boots disagrees (lines 1-2). I am not here to enter the debate over who is correct. Instead, I aim to analyze how this interaction was presented as inauthentic and disrespectful in Eden's narrative while acknowledging that I do not know Boots' counternarrative or intentions. The first offense began when Boots said Eden's appearance was 'chopped' (line 4). This term originates in ballroom spaces and is used when someone is cut or eliminated from a category (Saad, 2024). When applied to a person, it denotes inadequate performance or appearance. It should be noted that while 'reading' is an act of insult, it counterintuitively builds camaraderie without true malicious intent. The difference between a 'read' and a flat-out insult is in the rhythmic style shift (Calder, n.d.). Jaylah and Orion's repetition of the word 'chopped' (lines 5-6) in disbelief during Eden's retelling signals that something else is going on here. At the beginning of my

focus group, I asked them to generate words and phrases that they consider BQIL, and 'chopped' made the list. It was not that Boots' attempt at a 'read' was misunderstood; instead, it was the contents of the performative insult that came off abrasively to Eden:

D: oh yeah it was really bad because he went from a super like [factual, like- like weird
B: [cunty
D: voice when trying to like mansplain something to literally imitating a black woman and I feel like- [yeah I feel like
B: [yeah
D: I just I just said I just said that that's what you were doing (0.2) like I think I just said, you know, he's like he is very [strange.

Both speech styles that Boots utilized in the interaction offended Eden, the first being patronizing 'mansplaining' and the second being the sassy and deviant archetype of the Black woman (line 3). When Eden confronts him about how he speaks to them, Boots tries to defend himself by explaining his involvement within the community. Jaylah, who has interacted with Boots the most in other on-campus spaces, provided more context to the group, specifically Boots' loose connections to the Ballroom scene via a white romantic partner:

B: yeah so like we:: um he used to tell me about like different things and like basically he dipped his t↓OE in like the Kiki scene.
B: KIKI SCENE MIND YOU ((taps table repeatedly for emphasis throughout)) NOT- NOT- NOT- THE ACTUAL SCENE? NOT I'M ACTUALLY PART OF A HOUSE. THE KIKI SCENE DIPPED AND DABBLED in that with his whITE French boyfriEND who did ballroom (0.2) in high school.
C: oh? but-
B: okay so that- (0.2) right.
B: Yeah. So, yes, like we have talked about balls before, like now, and he's like talking about how he's like, 'oh, I don't know which ones or I don't- I can't get in' or whatever, whatever. so it's just like I: you use this kind of pseudo connection that you have to it to like, 'oh, I know everything.'
D: and then at the end, he asked me, 'have you ever been to a ballroom [show before?'
C: [oh that's not-
D: no and I don't nEEd to gO to ONE=
C: =you don't
B: yeah [right like
F: [like what are you talking about?
B: corr↑E:CT
D: and he was like ((dropped their voice a couple of octaves and speaks with a lofty melodic

21 intonation to imitate Boots)) 'yeah. I mean, I grew up in like around Atlanta. [so I mean'
22 **B:** [what the fuck does
23 **B:** th↑AT mean?
24 **E:** that doesn't mean anything
25 **B:** right and I feel like just because you understand a part of the dANces and do your rEsearch
26 and know about the lAnguage like .hh you stILL don't have a connection to it like I would say
27 I'm a black queer person, but I'm not gonna say, 'oh, I know everything about the ballroom
28 scene=
29 **C:** ='cause I dO::n't

Jaylah begins her contextualization of Boots with his limited involvement in the Kiki scene (lines 1-4). The Kiki scene is a subcategory within Ballroom that is geared toward queer youth and more focused on community building and safe-sex messaging than the highly competitive voguing and face categories seen in the underground Ballroom scene that *Paris is Burning* illuminates (Smeyne, 2014). Not only is Jaylah critiquing Boots' claim of knowledge of the Ballroom scene because of his experience in the informal Kiki subcategory of Ballroom, but she is critiquing him because he was introduced to *that* scene through his partner, who is both white and French, all of which Jaylah emphasizes with her volume change (line 5). Jaylah refers to these ties he attempts to trace back to the Ballroom space as a "pseudo connection" (line 11), underscoring the absence of the "ancestral universal connection" due to his non-Black identity that is further problematized by his use of a white foreigner to trace his way back to a space established by Black queer people in New York City. Eden uses Jaylah's reference to Boots' "pseudo connection" way of showing his all-encompassing knowledge to lead listeners back into the narrative. The next thing that Boots asks Eden is whether they have been to a Ballroom show (line 13), to which Eden says no but that they do not need to attend one to be able to speak on the origins of reading someone (line 15). This is an echo to Jaylah's "ancestral universal connection," in which Eden does not have to showcase significant involvement in the Ballroom scene to take a stance on a debate with roots in that space because they are Black and queer just

like the founders of the space that they also argue are the creators of the term “read” that is being debated. Boots doubles down further on his expertise on Black queer spaces due to growing up around Atlanta (line 21), which Eden mocks in an attempt at Boots’ standard voice that he uses outside of mansplaining and being possessed by the ‘phantom of Blackness.’ Here, Eden uses what I will call “a lofty melodic intonation” (lines 20-21) and a pitch that is a couple of octaves lower than Eden’s normal speaking voice. This attempt at further authenticating his claims to speak about Black queer spaces through citizenship is then quickly denied by Joseline and Jaylah, who argues that no matter how much field-based research he does into the language and dances, he still does not have a genuine connection to it (lines 25-26).

Despite Boots’ attempts to establish his credibility on the topics of where the language originated and who can use it through his connections to the Ballroom scene, he is perceived as a know-it-all who the Black queer focus group participants argue actually knows *nothing*. A lot of this is due to the way that he defensively asserts himself when called out by Eden:

D: but he thinks he's a pioneer
E: he threw the first brick at Stonewall
All: ((cackling))
A: ((laughing)) I hate you
E: ((laughing)) I love that narrative. I love that narrative.
E: oh? you were there? you threw the first fucking brick at Stonewall? oh okay
All: ((laughs))
B: okay basically back to your point I think that like from a past perspective, I think because he as an Asian person, I think that he felt targeted [not only
C: [MHM for sure
B: as like a cis male, but as an Asian person (.) like you saying to his face, like this is not something that was created with you in mind (.) he was like, 'because I've been in that space, like I have to prove myself' and 'oh, I feel bad'
B: like I really feel like that's [what it was
D: [I think so too
B: so instead of being like, 'yeah, I understand but I have experience in this space. He was just like ['well, I'm doing thIS
D: [defending himself

Eden argues that Boots is under the false assumption that he is a "pioneer" in the Ballroom space (line 1), and that is why he is attempting to educate them on a topic they believe he is not qualified to speak on. Joseline follows up on this point by sarcastically stating that not only was Boots present at the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City, but he must have been the revolutionary rebel who threw the first brick at police officers attempting to raid the gay bar (lines 2-6). In their eyes, this impossible time travel is the only way that Boots could possibly position himself as an all-knowing expert on queer spaces. Kevin Aviance states that this belief in being a pioneer is one of the issues in this new generation of queer people when he tells the nightclub crowd, "You weren't the first to wear that, OK bitch?...No girl, you weren't honey...it's all a part of the same kiki, carry-on, hoopla, la la, ga ga trala la lalalala" (Allen, 2021, p. 28). My Black queer interlocutors have an acute awareness that they are not the creators of these words and practices with historical implications that they are connected through via the "ancestral universal connection," and they do not move through queer spaces like they are, while this seems

to be what is missing in how Boots enters the same spaces. Jaylah hypothesizes that his Asian American identity causes this because, in his awareness that he is not the majority within the Ballroom space, Boots overcompensates with knowledge and "pseudo connections" to establish legitimacy (lines 8-13). This comes off as ignorant and inauthentic to my Black queer interlocutors as his attempts to establish space for himself feel like he is instead trying to take up *their* space.

While this narrative of Boots began as Eden's individual experience, it became a more extensive community story when my focus group participants all piled onto Boots to either share their own interactions with him to provide more context and support to Eden's claims or through their character evaluations that happen as they are introduced to him for the first time through Eden's retelling of their debate. Through Boots, they construct a caricature of a BQIL appropriator that they would critique. This type of appropriator oscillates between their standard register, a patronizing tone, and possession by a Black woman, depending on how they are moving through spaces. This is someone that tries to justify their connections to Black queer space through knowledge and "pseudo connections" while simultaneously denying the validity of the "ancestral universal connection" and the foundational importance of Black queerness. Often, especially in the case of Boots, this person does not even realize that they are doing it.

Another Pretty Gyal (NOT) from Joburg

Mari is a productive comparison against Boots because while they both co-opt BQIL, Mari does so in a very self-aware way. The Black queer focus group participants construct Boots' persona through the retelling of their interactions with him, while Mari is given the agency to craft his own as someone who I interviewed at length and know personally. Mari and I met in

Spanish class during our first semester at Emory and immediately bonded because our families live in Maryland. On multiple occasions, when he introduced me to his friends, he explained that we were both from Maryland. However, I always interject to provide the vital context that I was born and raised in *Black* Maryland, specifically Charles and Prince George's County, and he moved to the state in high school and resides in Bethesda, which is part of *white* Maryland. While he attempts to present our friendship as a unified geographical front, I always put some distance between us because despite living within the same state borders, we are from two different cultural identities and socioeconomic backgrounds, and, depending on the route you take, two different sides of the Potomac River. As we will see later in this section, Mari tends to exaggerate or build "pseudo connections" between himself and other identity groups, which helps him get closer to some people while others run the other way. What sets him apart from Boots is his acute awareness of these false connections and proximities he creates.

When I texted Mari to recruit him for this project, he responded, "OHHHHH ID LOVE TO HELP as a ling[uistics] major and a queer and someone who does appropriate it." Mari employs awareness of his BQIL appropriation and formal training as a linguistics major at Emory to convey his credentials as the perfect candidate for this project. Mari is a first-generation South-Asian American born and raised in the South. He lived in several Southern states for the first 14 years of his life before his parents settled in Bethesda, Maryland, where he spent all of high school. His upbringing is a cultural amalgamation of traditional Southern practices that he learned at school and a deep-rooted sense of his South Asian identity as his parents predominantly interacted with the larger diaspora within their Southern communities. This amalgamation is also reflected in his multilingual background, which made him a lover of language:

Mari: the way I speak is a variety of what I heard growing up so obviously (.) my parents (.) the way my parents speak I'm very obviously influenced by that like we spoke multiple languages at home so I had a very multilingual environment (.) it kind of allowed me to have a very like (.) fluid sense of speaking and also like I can switch back (.) like I feel like I need to speak one way or another so me being a very fluid like being very fluid in the way I switch my code has always been there um (.) especially because for a lot of second gen immigrants (0.2) code switching is very normal in the tense of going from very American English variations to like mimicking the way your parents speak (0.5) I think I always like was enamored by the different accents and languages I was exposed to growing up whether it be the Indian languages my parents spoke and these are like four to five languages Indian languages that I was exposed to growing up (.) um on top of that like like hearing Spanish in sch↑ool or like hearing my Chinese American friends like speaking Chinese (.) one of my closest friends in Lexington was Japanese his parents spoke Japanese and like I also was exposed to that um even like my African American friends African American friends wanna make that specific you know .hh hearing you know their parents or other people speak AAVE not in front of me but like when they code switch obviously in non-Black versus Black spaces

Mari remarks on how his plurilingual exposure growing up has encouraged him to be "fluid" (lines 3-5) in how he uses language, often switching dialects contextually, even within his household, where he speaks English and multiple Indian languages with his family (9-10). Daily travel from home and a South Asian diasporic community to the public schools of the South, where he was immersed in languages like Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, and AAE (lines 11-14), forced him to channel his language fluidity to interact with peers of different backgrounds. He also connects his experience of code-switching, or what he deems as "fluid", to what he noticed his African American peers and their families doing when interacting with various spaces (lines 13-16). Mari continues to operate "fluidly" at Emory, where he has built up a reputation for the way he carries himself through identity spaces that he does not align with, which he references a couple of times throughout our conversation:

Mari: now in terms of who it's being used by the most? definitely Black folks queer Black folks, Black women who are straight, honestly no shade um and then probably like Black adjacent queer folks who have a lot of Black friends and are learning the language you know? because I'm part of Black Emory as the Asian repres↓entative sorry Miss ((last name of current BSA president))
Me: so you've named yourself the Indian representative of the Black community at Emory?
Mari: ye::s and of ACES ((the university's Association of Caribbean Educators and Students)) too (laughs) and I just applied for my Joburg status so like I'm the second pretty gyal from Joburg ((the first being South African singer Tyla)) you know?

This stretch of dialogue comes after I asked him about his perceived meaning and origins of the word "trade," as seen in the last chapter. I also noted that Mari was the only non-Black participant familiar with the term. He credits his understanding of the term to his close relationships with Black peers (lines 1-3). Rather than stopping there, Mari goes on to make himself an honorary member of Emory's Black Student Alliance (BSA) as the "Asian representative" (line 4). When I ask if this is a title he has given himself or if someone else gave it to him, not only does he assert that he had agency in doing it, but he reveals he has awarded himself the same title in another space, ACES (line 7), and is jokingly working on getting another certification for a fictional connection to Johannesburg, South Africa (lines 8-9). While I do not believe he is referencing a "pseudo connection" to the African Student Association (ASA), Mari does have a controversial reputation in that student group as well for coming into one of their events during sophomore year and showing a little *too much* knowledge of their cultural practices, jokes, and references in a way that some found amusing and others saw as ignorant. This is something Mari is known for in multiple spaces and is something he consciously does to connect with his peers, as he explained to me when I asked about instances

in which he has used BQIL and what his intentions were:

Mari: so uh very good point and what I'll start with first is the way I use language is a means to connect to people and people might not underst↑and that because they've not (.) grown up in my upbringing where I was literally having to navigate like seven eight different cultural spaces (0.2) so for me the way I would like converse and kind of exist and thr↑ive was through language (0.8) and for me at my core I'm a polyglot and every language I've learned is part of me (.) they're either cultures I am a part of .hh or have a love and appreciation for so for m↑e in using that language it's very intentional (.) I'm gonna be using that language to mark solidarity, to mark love and appreciation, and when I'm using it in the proper w↑ays it's to indicate like 'I fuck with you guys' and 'you guys are people I see eye to eye with' right so I'm not gonna use it if I'm at ASO ((Asian Student Organization)) Night Market right?
Me: ((laughs))
Mari: I'm not gonna use it at ICA ((Indian Cultural Association)) Diwali right?

Mari explains that he uses language to connect with others but recognizes that his intentions are not always understood, especially by people who have never navigated diverse backgrounds as he has since his childhood in the South (lines 1-3). Mari considers himself to be a polyglot who has a very deep relationship with each language that he learns, in which they become more than a mode of communication and are inscribed into who he is and what he loves (lines 5-6). There is a conscious intentionality (line 7) that Mari has with his choice of words that seems to be missing with Boots as he seeks to enter a space and "mark solidarity...mark love and appreciation" (lines 7-8) rather than mark ownership and spatial rights like Boots. This intentionality also means that Mari does not just walk around using BQIL to everyone, as he says he would not use it at the ASO Night Market (line 10) or Diwali (line 12). BQIL is not a language that he uses every day to mark parts of his identity like Boots; rather, it is a way to show camaraderie with his queer Black peers. Unlike Boots, Mari is also aware of the varying perceptions of his image:

Mari: it might not always be understood and if it's not understood then I need them to communicate that with me ((switches to a voice more adjacent to a Black femme)) I can't read their mind honey um but
Me: this is why they tried to cancel you
Mari: ((with a flourish)) and they could neva ((colloquial pronunciation of "never" associated with AAE)) they really could neva because I'm the pretty gyal from Joburg ((snickers)) no but no doubt that there are people who do not like me for that but I cannot like appease everybody you know? and um I'm okay with that and I think the people that know me like know me best and they know I'm a person that's like going to be (.) loving multiple things and multi-faceted so um you know and also for them I understand why they're defensive 'cause they have been hurt by other people so I'm not (.) like I do empathize with that

Although Mari is aware that some students do not like him because of his attempts to use language to connect to them, he still insists that those who feel that way should tell him (lines 1-2) because he "can't read their mind honey" (line 2). Notably, he switches his voice to another octave more associated with Black femme personas when he talks about not being a mind-reader, to which I reminded him that "this is why they tried to cancel you" (line 4). Although I do not make it explicit here, the "they" in question are other Black students at Emory who take a divisive stance against Mari entering their space. Since Mari and I have discussed this topic off the record informally, he knows who the elusive "they" is. He insists that they could "neva" (line 5) cancel him because of his honorary self-bestowed position as the South Asian representative of Emory's Black affinity groups. However, he reminds us again that he is still tentatively, and jokingly, working on being elected to his honorary position in ASA (lines 5-6). Mari also re-orients us toward his "fluid" nature when he talks about how the people who understand his intentions and know him best are also aware that he is always "loving multiple things and multi-faceted" (lines 9-10). He will always be "fluid" in his interests and the ways he interacts with various spaces, and this comes from a place of seeking connections rather than trying to be offensive (line 11).

This section has mostly focused on the way that Mari intentionally constructs himself in spaces of identities that he does not personally ascribe to, but it is still fruitful to see an example of how his attempts play out differently within two people of the same group. To do that, I will analyze a short interaction between two of my focus group participants, Jaylah and Joseline. Harlem-born, Atlanta-raised Jaylah has had a significant presence throughout this work for her strong pro-Black queer stance. Joseline is a first-generation Trinidadian American from New Jersey who still has strong ties to her parents' home country, makes frequent trips back, and entrenches herself in the culture, even proudly brandishing the flag of Trinidad and Tobago as her display name on Instagram rather than her actual name. This brief exchange came out of the discussion of non-Black people's incorrect pronunciation of the AAE-derived word "chile" as the country "Chile" which is usually unintentional but sometimes purposeful:

1 **E:** Oh mY gO- ye::s ((Mari)) does that but like (.) as a joke
2 **B:** ugh
3 **E:** you don't like him?
4 **B:** >I dunno< he just rubs me the wrong way sometimes with that shit (0.8) and the way he
5 comes into spaces and acts like he's besties with everyone
6 **E:** yeah I get that but I'm cool with him I think he's just joking like when he calls me cousin
7 **B:** he better not ever call ↓me that shit

Joseline brings up Mari as an example of someone who uses the incorrect pronunciation of "chile" (line 1), although he does it intentionally, which he also did when I asked him to trace the word's roots and its meaning in our one-on-one interview. Jaylah shows an apparent disdain for either the incorrect usage or Mari (line 2), which Joseline asks her to clarify (line 3). Although from her pro-Black queer stance, it is likely both, she focuses on Mari (lines 4-5) and critiques the "pseudo connections" that he attempts to build with people in multiple spaces. While Joseline acknowledges that he is a problematic figure, she also recognizes that it comes from a place of wanting to connect and brings up the fact that he calls her his "cousin" (line 6), which Jaylah

vehemently shuts down (line 7). Mari and Joseline share no ancestry, as she does not identify as Indo-Caribbean, and he solely traces his heritage back to India. Their closest connection is through Mari's self-elected ACES South Asian representative position. Mari still choosing to refer to Joseline as his "cousin" despite knowing they do not share heritage, let alone a familial line, is an example of Mari fostering an exaggerated "pseudo connection" with someone of another identity group that is successful. At the same time, Jaylah reminds us that this does not work for everyone and that some people solely believe in the "ancestral universal connection" as a genuine one while everything else is a space-invasive façade.

"They'll understand"

Luna is a first-generation Salvadoran American senior born and raised in Houston, Texas. Before coming to Emory, she attended schools that were predominantly Black and Latinx and talks about frequently hearing other Latinx students co-opt the Black aesthetic in their clothing and language choices, including the use of the N-word. I offer Luna as an interesting counternarrative to both Boots and Mari, who are different in their awareness level as BQIL appropriators, but both experience overt backlash for it. Luna, on the other hand, is also aware that she appropriates the language but has never experienced any negative pushback from Black queer individuals. When I asked them how they think Black queer people perceive the use of BQIL by non-Black people and the effects, this is what she had to say:

Luna: it kinda is like a little bit like ostracizing people um kind of y↑eah I kind of do see that of course like I (.) >haven't experienced it 'cause I'm not Black and I don't use- well I do use AAVE and the intersectional language but it's not like (0.2) I'm like (.) experiencing like that type of ostracization and stuff like that so yeah yeah
Me: mhm I've had a few people say that it's less about using it and more about the intention behind it=
Luna: =y↑eah 'cause if you're just using it to express yourself then that's different than using it because you're in like a Black person's presence and you feel like you need to do it to fit in with them or else like (.) they won't hear you and it's like (.) you can speak normal like you can speak however you want and I promise you like they'll understand

Luna believes that the use of AAE and BQIL by non-Black people can feel ostracizing for Black individuals (line 1) but also recognizes that as someone who does not have that identity, their assumptions are surface level. Like Mari, Luna takes accountability for her AAE and BQIL usage (lines 3-4) and recognizes that she will never experience the harmful effects of ostracization that her Black peers who use the language experience. I echo the concept of "intentionality" (line 5) of BQIL usage, which came up in my focus group and multiple interviews, including Mari's. For my Black queer interlocutors, they focus less on policing the usage of BQIL, which has low feasibility due to the internet, and instead focus a lot of their efforts on calling out people, like Boots and Mari, who they feel use the language disrespectfully. Luna agrees with the importance of intention but makes an interesting point about what it means to her to use the language with a harmful intention versus a neutral one. For Luna, using it to "express yourself" (line 7) is different than using it "because you're like in a Black person's presence" (line 8). To Luna, those who shift to using BQIL when they are in the presence of a Black person make it seem as if that is the only way they can understand each other, contributing to those feelings of ostracization (lines 9-10). BQIL becomes a language of exchange rather than a space-specific language with critical historical roots for a specific intersectional identity. Luna's assertions are backed by the personal experiences of Giselle, my Ghanaian American interlocutor from Gwinnett County, Georgia:

Giselle: I- when I encounter situations like that (.) it's typically when I'm the only person of color in the room so I'm like ((laughing nervously)) are you trynna cOnnECt with mE::? like are you thinking like I don't speak like you kno:w (0.2) day-to-day English? you have to incorporate an insane amount of slang for me to like understan- like it feels wei↓rd it feels like (0.2) I don't know if people do it intentionally or if it just happens I don't really care. I feel like either way (.) it could be coming? from a semi-good place? but it just feels weird like it feels off because °you don't talk like that°

Like Luna, Giselle speaks to this shift to BQIL and AAE as a phenomenon that occurs just because a Black person is in the room (lines 1-2). Giselle also believes that the shift comes from an assumption that people who look like her do not speak or understand "day to day English" (lines 3-4). Ultimately, shifting to BQIL to communicate or explain something to a Black queer person comes off as patronizing regardless of whether the non-Black user is attempting to come at it from a good place (lines 5-7).

What seems to set Luna apart from Boots and Mari in her BQIL usage is her understanding of ostracization. When necessary, Luna uses it as a universal way to express herself rather than solely defaulting to it when she is in the presence of a Black queer individual. Although her performance is still not authentic because she lacks the "ancestral universal connection," it is not perceived as patronizing because it is used as a language of self-expression rather than a language as a doorway into a space that she does not ascribe to.

Conclusion

This chapter explored three inauthentic BQIL users: Boots, Mari, and Luna. All three are inauthentic because they lack the unique "ancestral universal connection" to BQIL that only people with the niche intersectional Black and queer identity possess. Boots and Mari are both critiqued for their BQIL usage while Luna is not. Boots is unaware of his negative perception amongst my Black queer participants due to his use of BQIL as a tool to establish himself as an

all-knowing figure in Black queer spaces that is above those with an “ancestral universal connection” to these spaces. Mari is acutely self-aware of how he traverses spaces and his differing reception. For him, BQIL is used exclusively in Black spaces to show an appreciation for the culture and a means of connection that is often not received. Luna is also a self-aware BQIL user, but unlike Boots and Mari, does not receive staunch criticisms because she uses BQIL as a consistent means of self-expression only in situations that call for it and does not alter the way she speaks in the presence of Black queer people.

CHAPTER III: Rights and Reclamations

This final chapter looks more closely into the tension of who my interlocutors believe has the "right" to BQIL as creators and authentic users. Participants provide three arguments across my discussions: only those with the unique intersectional experience of being Black and queer, all Black people who have a genuine connection to Black queer spaces, and anyone who wants to use it regardless of sexuality, gender, or race. This led to a conversation on the feasibility of reclaiming BQIL that has gone mainstream, which all of my participants believe is impossible due to the internet or the absence of a collective Black agenda.

Language Rights

Essentialized Blackness

One of the central motifs of this project is looking at who has the "right" to use BQIL. So far, this has predominantly been explored through my Black queer focus group participants contending with how to authenticate users, who can only be verified through what Jaylah calls the "ancestral universal connection" that privileges Blackness over queerness but also requires an adjacency to the queer experience via someone's own sexuality or gender identity or through a close relationship with Black queer people. While this conclusion was gathered indirectly by analyzing my interlocutors' ideas and putting them into conversation with each other, I did ask everyone who they felt had the "right" to BQIL and who would be the users in a perfect world without vehicles, like the internet, that facilitate the instantaneous movement of the language from in-groups to anyone seeking to access it.

Most of my interlocutors, like Giselle, a third-year Ghanaian American from Gwinnett County, echoed the thoughts of my focus group participants, who came to the agreement that any Black person who can verify a genuine connection to Black queer spaces should be able to use the language:

1 **Giselle:** okay I:: there are layers to th↓is there are layers to this 'cause I feel like some of the
2 words on the list are kinda more black than they are queer and vice versa? which is why I feel- it
3 feels the most normal when I'm hearing someone from both groups like using these terms. no:w
4 I don't really have a problem with like Black people using the terms 'cause in my mind it's
5 typically Black people or Black queer people that coined the terms

For Giselle, determining who should use BQIL is not straightforward as she believes that the words on the participant-derived list of BQIL phrases have "layers" (line 1) that caused her to struggle to put them into one category. Instead, Giselle conceptualizes the words as being on a spectrum with Black on one side and queer on the other (line 2), which we also see an example of in Chapter 1, where they consider "slay" to be more queer than Black and associate it with white queerness specifically. Due to BQIL phrases existing on this spectrum that requires intersectionality because terms are neither one identity nor the other, Giselle feels that it is most natural to hear someone from "both groups" using these phrases (line 3), which is a Black queer person, but also believes that Black heterosexual people can also use the terms since to them, BQIL is a mixture of terms created by Black queer people and Black heterosexual people (lines 4-5) which is supported by the inclusion of the word "chile" on the participant-derived list.

A Language of Exchange

While everyone else believed that either Black queer people specifically or the broader Black community have the "right" to BQIL, Mari held a different opinion:

Mari: in terms of who gets to use the language (.) so when Black queer folks are gonna say only we should use it my question (0.5) ↑is like (0.8) we- are we gonna segregate our language the language you're speaking because language will not work like that (.) there are separations and variations in language but the way a language grows is through exch↓ange right? so.hh many words in AAVE where do they come from? they come from the exchange of (0.2) west African languages that then transfer (.) if you look at other language like French creole in Louisiana you look at gullah geechee those are ↑other languages that have their own traditions so to think there's like a monolithic Black American culture that also needs to be broken down to understand that there are multiple variations of Black American culture .hh there are other sublanguages and subcultures in this Black American echelon that need to be understood and legitimized and preserved um (clears throat) and having more scholars and having more media using that language right? so encouraging more folks to use AAVE and not in like an >oh we have this kinda tokenized thing< but if people feel comfortable and they wanna codeswitch they sh↑ould switch um but people understanding the positionality of both languages is really important

Without my confirmation, Mari already assumes that Black queer people are going to stake a claim on BQIL (lines 1-2). Mari then asks if we will "segregate our language" (line 2). Here we see him creating a "pseudo connection" to Black queer people again through this collectivized "our" in which he includes himself, a South Asian, in the dealings of Black language. As we see in Chapter 2, Mari has the tendency to conflate his identity with the Black diasporic experience through various acts like establishing false kinship lines by calling Black people "cousin" or appointing himself as the South Asian representative of multiple Black diasporic organizations, a position that does not exist. Mari goes on to remove himself from BQIL (line 3) by changing his rhetoric to the language "you're" speaking, which is ironic since he considers himself to be an open user of the language as well. He denies the productivity of only Black queer individuals using BQIL because, while he acknowledges that languages do have variations, he also states that languages can only grow through exchange (lines 3-4). He specifically cites the contributions that West African languages had on what we classify today as the French Creole of Louisiana and Gullah Geechee in coastal regions of the South (lines 6-7). In some ways, I disagree with his argument because it assumes that the *only* type of linguistic exchange and growth possible is transcontinental and from one ethnicity to another, which linguists have

proved is false. In fact, segregation or isolation is also a significant proponent of language growth, as can be seen with what linguists call 'urban AAVE,' a new type of AAE that emerged in the twentieth century as a result of the Great Migration in which large amounts of African Americans moved to the North. According to Wolfram (2004), "the large influx of African Americans in these metropolitan areas led to intensified racial isolation and, along with other social and cultural ramifications...a social environment conducive to the maintenance of ethnolinguistic differences" (p.111). Urban AAVE, which is now a large part of African American and broader youth culture and "Gen Z slang," relied on the intentional isolation of African Americans during the civil rights struggle to be created and grow (Wolfram, 2004, p. 113). The Urban AAVE that comes out of Baltimore differs from the urban AAVE that comes out of New York due to that geographic isolation. Still, these individualized communities are contributing to the growth of the overall urban AAVE lexicon without a concrete reliance on transcontinental, transethnic, or transracial exchange. Mari believes that to have more Black languages "legitimized and preserved" (line 11), more people should be encouraged to use languages like BQIL because it will bring them more exposure and ultimately attract more people to the linguistics field who can become scholars that specialize in educating others and removing stigma (lines 11-13). While Mari argues that identity should not matter in BQIL usage, he also believes that understanding the language's context is still important (lines 13-14). However, from what we have seen, my Black queer interlocutors would argue that identity is the exact thing that is vital to understanding context. While they do have a leaning toward race being more important than queerness to an authentic BQIL performance, as my focus group participants will tell you, there is still nothing quite like the intersectional experience of being

Black and queer:

E: ‘cause I think black people sometimes (0.5) you know
All: you kno::w black people ((TikTok reference))
E: I mean obviously you love your community but it's kind of just like [do you
B: [it’s not genuine
E: as a black person who's not queer, do you know the implications of what it means? But then when you use that argument, then white queer people are like ‘wELL I'm gAy, I'M qUEEr, I knOW what it mEANs, so I can say it’ but then it's like [but are you black?
F: [it’s like are you black?

Here, Joseline focuses on heterosexual, cisgender Black people and the ways in which there is solidarity due to the shared experience of being Black, but there seems to be a separation in views due to queerness (lines 1-3). Jaylah agrees, saying that due to this disconnect, their use of BQIL comes off as “not genuine” (line 4). Joseline then reconstructs Giselle’s spectrum in which only Black queer people fully comprehend BQIL and its importance, which is significant because the two have never met. Non-queer Black people do not recognize the implications of using queer language. In contrast, non-Black queer people do not fully understand Black language (lines 5-8), so ultimately, the only people who understand BQIL’s positionality to its fullest are Black queer people. Even Mari seems to have this awareness, which weakens his stance on the arbitrary “everyone” possessing the “right” to BQIL:

Mari: so qu↑eer non-Black folks pick up a language but it does not have a cultural connection right so it’s not gonna be used as frequently um also because like (.) for them it’s a trendy word so it’ll lose it’s it-factor (.) it’s not a part of their cultural practice and dialect so for th↑em it’s gonna be different the way they view that word the way they view using that word is not gonna be the same as the way (0.2) as a cultural practice

Mari acknowledges that when non-Black queer people use BQIL, they are missing a “cultural connection” that I would argue is the equivalent of Jaylah’s “ancestral universal connection.” For them, BQIL is only trendy language, meaning it lacks the longevity these words clearly show with their historical roots in places like the underground Ballroom scene (lines 2-3). If those

outside of the Black queer intersection will never fully be invested in the importance of these words beyond something trending on a social media platform, why should we encourage them to be scholars on a subject they do not fully grasp the significance of? Furthermore, Mari admits that the lens through which non-Black queer people view BQIL will always be different because "it's not part of their cultural practice and dialect" (line 3). This means that it is ultimately impossible for them to fully understand the "positionality" (line 14, p. 85) of these that he argues is necessary for anyone who is not a Black queer person to advocate for themselves using the language properly. Mari's acknowledgment of the importance of the "ancestral universal connection" causes his argument on a broader "right" to BQIL to cave in on itself.

Main Takeaway

After analyzing both arguments on who has the "right" to BQIL, participants seem to favor the idea that Black queer people and non-queer Black people with ties to the Black queer community have the most substantial claim due to their focus on the irreplaceable "ancestral universal connection" which Mari, the only person disagreeing with this stance also acknowledges is vital to understanding BQIL's importance. Mari's claims that anyone who wants to use BQIL should be encouraged to because it will foster growth and understanding of the legitimacy of BQIL is contradicted by scholarly research, context shifts that happened to words like "slay," as seen in Chapter 1 when they were introduced in mainstream culture, and Mari's own acknowledgment of the "ancestral universal connection."

Linguistic Reclamation

Amongst most of this project's participants, it is agreed upon that BQIL use should be confined to a niche group, whether that be Black queer people or the broader Black community. However, the very existence of this project demonstrates that this has not been the case, and many of these words have been brought into the mainstream via social media and pop culture. This brought up the idea of linguistic reclamation which in this context involves taking back words that once belonged to Black queer people and arguing for complete ownership. This introduced the question of feasibility: is it possible to confine the language to a niche group? For words that have already entered other spaces, is it possible to bring them back into their original contexts?

So Current, So on the Nose, So Mainstream

Some of my interlocutors argue that with the existence of the Internet, it is impossible to bring a lot of BQIL that has experienced a context shift back into the niche community:

Joseline: so it's kind of like, but to localize a language to just be for black queer people, I think it's difficult because we're so current, we're so on the nose, we're so mainstream, so everybody wants to use our language. so it's like we can say that it is for us, it's used by us, we know it- we know what it means, we know the historical implications, but once it's out into the world via the Internet, it's no longer going to be ours

During the focus group, following who has the "right" to BQIL in their ideal world, Joseline brings the group back to reality. A reality in which Black queer people are "so current...so on the nose...so mainstream" (line 2) that everyone wants to use their language due to it being trendy, as Mari pointed out in his dialogue on "cultural connection" (line 1, p. 87). Joseline argues that regardless of how much Black queer people try to claim BQIL for themselves, the Internet will always result in a loss of ownership (lines 3-5). This makes it impossible for BQIL to fully

belong to them again because some words are impossible to reclaim. Mila, a non-Black bisexual person who does not appropriate the language but attended a high school in Florida where she witnessed a lot of BQIL context shifts, echoes Joseline's point:

1 **Mila:** I think (0.8) I think only people who are Black and qu↑eer (0.5) but I think there is some
2 language that I don't know if (0.2) it'll like (0.5) I mean again I have such a like narrow lens of
3 what I have seen and what I've heard I think like like I mentioned in those skits like 'tea' and
4 'slay' were everywhere so I feel like those I don't know will ev- (.) like (.) and maybe this could
5 be said for a lot of these words that you put on there (.) I don't know if a lot of these words can
6 ever be like completely like reclaimed like (.) I don't think (.) I don't think it could be
7 compl↑etely reclaimed ever ag↑a:in or like it's only Black and queer individuals who will say it
8 ever ag↑a:in

Mila believes that only Black queer people should use BQIL (line 1) but that even with her limited experiences interacting with the language, its use in other contexts is pervasive. She brings up "tea" and "slay" (lines 3-4) as examples of words that she frequently saw non-Black people at her high school use. Mila references her involvement in a national skits competition (line 3) in which they were given a problem to solve and had to act it out. The non-queer cisgender boys in her group were always excited to pretend to be women, and while part of this was through clothing, a large part of it was language. They frequently used words like "slay" and "tea" that they saw femme people using online and incorporated them into their script to convey their pretend womanhood. With the amount that Mila was experiencing out-group use of these words within the competition setting and walking down the halls of her school, she cannot imagine a world in which some words can be reclaimed (lines 5-8). However, Mila does not believe that *all* BQIL is lost to mainstream culture, only "a lot" (line 5), leaving some sort of ambiguous hope that some phrases may stay in their rightful group context. Mila is not the only participant who traces BQIL's entrance into the quotidian as something that starts on the internet and then moves to in-person spaces. During their interview, Giselle talked at length about one group project she was a part of during the semester:

1 **Giselle:** yeah in person so like if I'm in like a class or in my group project .hh lord help me
2 **Me:** ((snickers))
3 **Giselle:** hold on can I do a brief intermission?
4 **Me:** yeah
5 **Giselle:** so there's this one girl in my group that like (.) every time we meet she has a new like-
6 she has a new phrase and so I think last time she 'fucks with our assignment heavy' (0.2) that
7 was the phrase I kept hearing (0.5) then there's the other girl who's like 'yeah I fuck heavy too'
8 (.) you fUCk hEAVy? WHAT dOEs thAT M↓EAn? what does-and you're saying it so loud in
9 class that you 'fuck heavy'
10 **Me:** yeah 'cause that means something a little bit different
11 **Giselle:** a LITTLE bIT dIFFerent a LITtle bit different wha:t? you fuck h↑eavy? and you're
12 saying it with your full chest in class why would you say that? I'm so-I- white people scare me.
13 'cause why would you say something you don't even- un- anyway

When I asked Giselle where she hears BQIL most, she said it has been within in-person spaces since she deleted TikTok, especially in her classes or group settings (line 1). Giselle veers away from the question at hand to give an example in which a girl brings some new AAE or BQIL phrase to each group project meeting that they have. In this scenario, it's that she "fucks with our assignment heavy" (line 6). To "fuck with something heavy" is an expression used to convey "when you strongly like something" ([@Bung Chung], 2017). Another girl, whom Giselle later confirms is white, says, "Yeah, I fuck heavy too" (line 7) in agreeance. This takes Giselle aback because the girl has unknowingly announced to anyone in the class within earshot that she is extremely sexually active (lines 8-9). On its own, "heavy" has meanings ranging from a large amount to "'seriously' or 'for real' depending on the situation" ([@Come Get It Back In MF Blood], 2021). The removal of the object of reference in the middle of the white girl's phrase causes it to take on an entirely different meaning than she intended (lines 10-11). Giselle is particularly distraught at this girl's ignorance of what she has *actually* just said and her confidence in using a phrase she has no connections to or understanding of (lines 12-13). Later in our conversation, when I asked Giselle if she saw any connections between what she had seen online and what she heard in person, she brought this group project up again:

1 **Giselle:** well ye:s that's why we see so many white people using these words incorr↑ectly
2 **Me:** ((laughs))
3 **Giselle:** like girls saying they 'fuck heavy' in class they're getting it from the internet and it
4 bleeds into real life (.) it doesn't transfer properly all the way but you kn↓ow it's still making its
5 way there. when I hear white people saying like (0.2) these words? they're encountering them
6 from like (0.2) social media? and so it's that like 'o:h TikTok language duhduhduh' or whatever

Giselle ultimately blames the internet for hearing non-Black, and specifically white people, use BQIL and AAE incorrectly (line 1). When looking at the example of her peer who "fucks heavy," Giselle sees a clear connection in which non-Black people are "getting it from the internet and it bleeds into real life" (lines 3-4). The language never transfers correctly as it gets decontextualized and becomes associated with the platform it was found on, such as the "TikTok language" (line 6) that Giselle cites. My participants are not the only people who experience this as McAndrew (2022) discusses their TikTok experience in being "immediately bombarded with Ebonics spouted by non-Black creators and commentators; my feed is filled with stolen words whose original deviance from Standard English has been reduced to a social media trend by white teenagers" (para. 2). Many people interact with social media without dissecting the context that what they are viewing comes from, which Mari talks about in his construction of the Internet as a "double-edged sword" last chapter.

Not Monolithic

All of my interlocutors, except for Orion, talk about being heavy social media users, whether in the present or at some point in the past. While Orion does have social media, specifically Instagram, they are rarely active, which I have experienced firsthand in trying to send videos and memes to them with no response. Due to this, Orion does not view the reclamation of BQIL as

unfeasible because of the digital sphere. Instead, they connect it back to their everyday experience as an African American who primarily interacts with other Black people:

Orion: I'd be surprised if we came up with a community resolution it's just very individual (.) to me at least (.) like I know ten different Black people (0.2) that have ten different you know ideas about how they speak, how they look, how they speak when they look one way versus the other you know?

Orion does not see the Black community coming together as a complete entity to fight for the reclamation of BQIL or AAE more broadly as possible because of differing individual views (line 1). Orion orients us to the fact that Black people are not a monolith, and even a single person can conceive themselves differently depending on what space they inhabit at a given time (lines 2-4). Even with a majority opinion, there will always be people that disagree, which has even been seen in my Black queer participants' arguments of authenticating non-queer Black people's use of BQIL and whether they even *can* be authenticated. Although all of my Black queer interlocutors convey a deep sense of importance that BQIL has for them, which is why they chose to participate in this project, not all queer Black people hold the same regard for the language, and some may not even be acquainted with it. To Orion, BQIL will continue to slip through the cracks into mainstream culture because we will never all be on one accord.

At the end of each interview, I opened the floor to each interlocutor and allowed them to ask any questions they may have or share anything they felt that the scope of my interview questions did not account for. Orion's main takeaway stood out the most to me:

Orion: u::m I think- I think just the fact that like (.) you care and you're doin' this work it's a lil hope you know? I- I be in my Afro-pessimist bag [I be deep in there
Me: [oh no me too I like to be
Me: Afro-surrealist on the weekends (0.5) so what's it like being in your Afro-pessimist bag? what does- how does that make you view the world?
Orion: first of all I don't even be viewing the world like that um yeah I mean (0.2) I think (.) Afro-pessimism for me is like (.) it is real it is immediate (.) I'm no:t- I don't think in theory? theory is not gon' like (.) >help me graduate and just like get this degree< it's not gon' like (0.2) advance (.) you know (.) the five second first impression somebody will get of me when they talk to me (.) um so yeah just being realistic=
Me: =ok↑ay so you're just like realistic
Orion: ye::ah I'm like well what is it? what can I do? what can't I do? and why does all that matter? th↑at's it.

Prior to the interview, Orion took a clear stance on BQIL never being legitimized or acknowledged in mainstream culture. Somehow, our singular interview has brought him hope (lines 1-2), even if it is small. Orion identifies with Afro-pessimism, a term coined by Frank Wilderson (2015), that claims "Blackness is coterminous with slaveness: Blackness *is* social death" (p. 139). Like Wilderson, Orion believes that his experience as Black means that he is not legitimized with autonomy and personhood in society, and as a result, neither is his language. When I asked how the Afropessimist lens impacts their views on the world, Orion discusses their unique refusal to view and participate in a world that denies them humanity based on their Blackness (line 6). Before the focus group and this interview, Orion did not see the value in theorizing and asking these sorts of questions (line 7) because they spend the majority of their time entrenched in their reality as a Black American in which theory does nothing to contribute to his survival as someone who society already builds incorrect perceptions of and considers to be socially dead (lines 7-9). Orion's idea of being "realistic" (line 10) for the future of BQIL necessitates pessimism and a focus on the small things they can do as an individual that does not contribute much to the larger population due to infinite perceptions of self across the diaspora

(lines 12-13). This Afro-pessimistic lens makes the reclamation of BQIL entirely unfeasible for Orion.

Main Takeaway

The entire participant population in this project meets the idea of reclaiming BQIL with ambivalence that trends toward negativity. Most of them cite the internet and social media, making it easier for BQIL to be accessed by outside groups and decontextualize BQIL from its creators. This phenomenon bleeds into reality as people take the words they hear on social media and bring them into everyday spaces and contexts that they did not originate in or were not created for. Orion uniquely cites the Black experience for the reason that BQIL can never be reclaimed, arguing that the reclamation of BQIL is not on the agenda for all Black queer people, let alone the larger diasporic population. To them, many Black people are focused on their image and surviving in a world that does not humanize them and thus does not care to legitimize BQIL as something important or solely created by Black people for in-group use.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the ideas of who has the "right" to BQIL and whether or not it is possible for it to be reclaimed by the niche Black queer intersectional group after many words have entered mainstream culture and been absorbed under the umbrella of internet slang. The majority of my interlocutors believe that either Black queer people or Black people as a collective have the "right" to BQIL and should be the only users. At the same time, one argued that anyone should be able to use the language because it will promote more acceptance of it and encourage more dedicated research and understanding. Ultimately, the latter argument falls short

due to the absence of the "ancestral universal connection" in non-Black groups that would be essential to fostering a genuine understanding of BQIL. This conversation of who has the "right" to the language brought up conversations of how to reclaim BQIL if it is possible. Everyone agreed that words that have already entered the mainstream and experienced context shifts, like "slay," can never be recovered. Ultimately, as long as the Internet facilitates the ability to enter groups that a person does not belong to, and Black people continue to be a disunified front, BQIL will continue to be appropriated without context awareness.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

With this project, I sought to make the intersection between AAE and queer language more explicit and to give it a definitive name, Black Queer Intersectional Language (BQIL). My interlocutors provided key insights into BQIL, including a list of phrases they classify as belonging to this intersection, where these words originate from versus where members of Generation Z are being exposed to them, what separates an "authentic" BQIL user from an "inauthentic" one, and who has the "right" to BQIL.

Most of the words that my Black queer participants gave as examples of BQIL can be traced back to Black queer Ballroom and drag spaces of the 1980s and 1990s and were first brought into the mainstream spotlight via Jennie Livingston's 1991 documentary *Paris Is Burning*. My interlocutors discussed encountering the words most on social media platforms like TikTok, Twitter/X, and Instagram, which decontextualizes words from their history and leads to changes in who words are associated with, such as "slay" which has gone from being associated with the Black and Latinx queer Ballroom scene to the everyday language of heterosexual cisgender white women.

In the eyes of my Black queer interlocutors, only Black people are capable of "authentic" BQIL usage via what Jaylah refers to as the "ancestral universal connection" in which their credibility on BQIL and Black queer spaces is established through their intersectional identity as Black queer people. For them, the racial aspect of Blackness is more critical to building a genuine connection to the language than queerness, making them more tolerant of non-queer Black people using BQIL than non-Black queer people. While the "ancestral universal

connection" dictates that no non-Black queer person is capable of authentic BQIL usage, this does not mean that all non-Black BQIL users face backlash from my Black queer participants. They focus less on policing the usage of BQIL, which they see as impossible mainly due to the internet, and instead focus on calling out people who they feel use the language disrespectfully. My participants draw a divisive line between using BQIL as a means of self-expression that permeates your everyday life and only switching to using BQIL in the presence of Black people, which my Black queer interlocutors see as ostracizing and patronizing regardless of if people use it to show knowledge of a space, like Boots, or to foster connections to peers, like Mari.

Most of my participants believe that in an ideal world, BQIL would only be used by either all Black people or just those at the intersection of Blackness and queerness, citing some form of the "ancestral universal connection" as their reasoning. However, with the internet's significant role in Generation Z culture, they meet the idea of confining BQIL to one niche group with an ambivalence that leans toward pessimism since they believe many of these words cannot be reclaimed. Online consumers tend not to be critical of the information they are presented with, where it comes from, and its historical significance due largely to algorithms that create "echo chambers" in which people only encounter other users with similar mindsets. However, even my self-identified Afro-pessimist, Orion, sees hope for more awareness and education coming from this project's completion.

Analytical Frameworks

Abolitionist Anthropology

Abolitionist anthropology "finds its answers in the register of the quotidian, in the cruddy, ordinary facts of blackness" (Fanon, 1967, as cited in Shange, 2019, p. 9). It recognizes

that progressive institutions are not enough to liberate Black communities and encourages anthropologists to reflect critically on their presence within their work and the consideration of intersectional viewpoints. I chose Emory as my research site due to its position as a progressive institution. I centered the everyday experiences of my Black queer participants to show the shortcomings of the progressive institution in making my Black interlocutors feel legitimized, something explicitly discussed by Orion, the self-identified Afro-pessimist (lines 6-13, p. 93). My positionality as a Black queer student at the institution I conducted my interviews is imbued throughout the work as a mode of transparency and contextualization of the people I interact with. My identity is a strength in this work rather than a weakness or conflict of interest. I see diverse perspectives and intersectionality as a strength and derived many of my findings on BQIL from putting my interlocutors in conversation with each other across differences of race and ethnicity, sexuality, and gender identity to introduce complex perspectives. Most importantly, I used Conversation Analysis (CA) conventions as a tool of Abolitionist Anthropology when transcribing my interviews to privilege the voices of people who tend to be silenced in hegemonic society and build the questioning of language politics that privilege white users of Standard American English (SAE) over other groups into the foundations of my paper. The CA transcription style allowed me to present the language of marginalized voices in the quotidian exactly how it was said and engage in *willful defiance,* a practice of Black refusal that rejects the political and challenges the legitimacy of the state and its effects (Shange, 2019, p. 16).

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) “studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political

context" (van Dijk, 2001, p.1). CDA was a very important part of not only the way I interpreted and framed my Black queer participants' ideas of BQIL tolerance by various groups but also how I analyzed the debate of Boots and Eden and Jaylah's opinion of Mari in Chapter 2. The greater tolerance for non-queer Black users of BQIL by my Black queer participants is rooted in ideas of Black solidarity that come from shared experiences of inequality and abuse in social and political spheres in society. The CDA framework was also instrumental in understanding why my Black queer interlocutors participated in a collective critique of Boots and Jaylah's disdain for the "pseudo connections" that Mari attempts to build with his Black peers. A lot of their criticism was rooted in the "ancestral universal connection" to BQIL that they argue that Boots and Mari do not possess due to their non-Black racial identity and how they make attempts to enter Black queer space through their use of BQIL to index their knowledge of the space and its cultural practices.

Emory Revisited

It is important to revisit the question of why Emory serves as a productive field site for the study of BQIL in Generation Z, and it is due to the contradictory nature of attending an institution that prides itself on cultural education and a diverse learning environment that we would expect to limit language appropriation and the reality that my interlocutors experience, which is that it is still pervasive in many on-campus spaces. Most of my interlocutors have attributed the persistence of this language use to Generation Z's unique level of social media activity in which the language used online in various trends is brought into in-person spaces. It seems that while being students at Emory does not make everyone stop using BQIL, as we see with the case studies of Boots, Mari, and Luna, it *does* make them more aware of the language's

cultural and historical roots and the importance of being educated on it, even if you do choose to still use it as someone who does not hold the Black queer intersectional identity.

I believe that these perspectives are generalizable to the broader Generation Z queer community because they deal with the transmission of online trends to in-person spaces, both generally social and academic. I would not concretely apply them to the younger portion of Generation Z due to the skewed age of interest in this study being college students who frequent queer spaces, which a lot of queer youth in Generation Z may not have access to outside of those that are created online. It will be interesting to see how generalizable the language will be as time passes since the Generation Z codex is expansive and ever-changing. In a short amount of time, some of the words labeled as BQIL by my Black queer participants have the potential to be so popularized that they join the fate of "slay" and become decontextualized or they will no longer be trendy. However, what seems to be clear is the persistence of BQIL coming out of the Ballroom culture established decades before.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was that I did not have access to the broader Emory population and was leveraging my connections to the Office of LGBT Life, meaning I only interviewed people who frequent queer spaces. This meant that a lot of my participants were either people that I know personally or were recruited via snowball sampling, so they were still connected to people I know. I inadvertently created my own "echo chamber" of sorts. This may have skewed my data, specifically on the topics of tolerance of people outside of the Black queer intersection using BQIL and who has the "right" to BQIL. I hypothesize that my findings may have been different if I talked to more people who do not have such close proximity to on-campus queer spaces or

any level of a relationship with me. Recruitment for this project was also challenging due to the university's posting policy constraints, meaning I had to rely on my networks to get the word out. This led to a distribution that favored more upperclassmen participants, so I only had one first-year and second-year participant, respectively. A more equal distribution of years could have offered a more accurate representation of Generation Z college students and their ideas on BQIL, offering a generative comparative approach across age groups.

Future Research

An entire separate project can be conducted on the "ancestral universal connection" and how it influences tolerance and Black solidarity among BQIL users regardless of ethnicity, sexuality, and gender identity. I wanted to include it within this project, but with the page and time constraints of this project, I would not have done the topic justice. Eden stated in their argument on the "right" to BQIL that all Black people have authorization to use it because they are affected by the same "gender dynamics" (line 2, p. 47). This led me to think about how Blackness, especially Black womanhood, is inherently queer in the way that it is framed by hegemonic society. Black women experience hypermasculinization as a result of being framed as the antithesis of ideal white femininity, placing them in an ambiguous area as neither feminine enough to reach idealism nor the representation of peak masculinity like Black men. Within the larger acceptance of non-queer Black people using BQIL, there seems to be an increased tolerance by my Black queer participants for non-queer cisgender Black women to use BQIL due to this ambiguity, which Jaylah points toward in her rebuttal to Eden (lines 6-7, p. 47). This dilemma seems like a generative space for another project focusing on the limits of Black solidarity and monolithic thought.

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APPENDIX

CA Symbol	Meaning
[	Indicates the onset of overlapped speech
underline	Stress and emphasis on part of an utterance
:	Lengthening of vowels or consonants within words, more colons mean increased lengthening
(0.0)	The duration of pauses within utterances
° °	Talk located between degree symbols is spoken at a lower volume than the surrounding talk
↑ ↓	Sharply rising pitch, sharply falling pitch
.	Final falling intonation in a stretch of talk
?	Rising intonation throughout a stretch of talk, not necessarily a question
,	Continuing intonation that hovers in the middle of speech
> <	Talk between these symbols is rushed when compared to speaker's usual conversation speed
.hh / hh	Inbreath/exhalation
=	The second speakers talk begins immediately after the first speaker ends, no overlapping
-	A sudden break or restart in speech
(( ))	Transcriber comments about something happening in the interaction

List of Conversation Analysis (CA) transcription conventions used in the dialogue of this project