

# Pride Month 2021

As we enter another pride season, the Committee of LGBTQ+ (Z) Issues in Linguistics (COZIL) is excited to continue sharing blog posts by members of the LGBTQ+ community to share work and thoughts on current events and issues relevant to queer linguists of all backgrounds. Last year, we shared [several blog posts](#) during a time of great unrest and uncertainty, with a pandemic having emerged and ongoing racial inequity and violence more prominently featured in media and everyday discussions. The fervor around both has waned in the United States, to the point that support for Black Lives Matter and racial justice has reportedly [dropped to levels lower than in the time prior to George Floyd's murder](#). Since last summer, we've seen a transformation of many aspects of our lives, including an election season, insurrection, new presidential administration, vaccine rollout, and for many a return to a more social life as places begin to loosen restrictions and open up.

For many in America, a return to 'normal' has pushed aside the important issues and struggles that minoritized groups continue to face. As linguists and language experts, we must not allow ourselves to revert back to a time when these important issues were brushed under the rug and ignored. [Recent calls within the field](#) have included highlighting the racist legacies of linguistics as a field and calling for more concerted efforts to seek racial justice. We feel this is long overdue, and want to encourage all of us to continue to think intersectionally on the ways that issues of race are also issues of gender and sexuality – and work to combat the white supremacy and heteropatriarchal roots that too often guide the way we must navigate the world around us. In many ways, LGBTQ+ issues in Linguistics have also been relegated to the margins in our field, with many queer linguists also finding themselves in sociocultural programs and finding their work is often more valued and more accepted in other related fields than it is within Linguistics. Our goal is to help increase the visibility of queer linguists, and to highlight the important work that queer linguists do within the field, whether directly related to LGBTQ+ topics or not.

This year, as Americans begin celebrating in-person pride events again, we hope you will all remember that we are immensely privileged to be in a country that has had a substantial vaccine rollout in order to hold in-person events again and recognize the struggles many other countries are facing as the pandemic rages on globally. None of us are truly free until we are all free, and we hope to continue working toward anti-racist, anti-trans, and anti-homophobic sentiments, policies, and macro- and microaggressions that still surround us, and affect the most marginalized among us.

For this year's blog posts, we are highlighting topics including violence against Asian Americans, LGBTQ+ individuals in the military, and trans activism.

Other goings on during this month include a Pride Month Wikipedia edit-a-thon! Come join COZIL to expand Wikipedia pages on queer linguistics, linguists, and pages on language and gender! Those of you who are new to Wikipedia editing, as well as those who already have experience, are welcome to join. The Edit-a-Thon will be organized as a Zoom event on June 12. Experienced Wiki editors will be available during this time to answer questions, help

troubleshoot and help new editors get started. Besides helping to correct systemic biases in the topics and people represented in Wikipedia, joining the edit a thon is a fun way to work with a community of linguists to spread linguistics knowledge to the public! [Read more and register for the Edit-a-Thon](#). We hope to see you there!

In June, COZIL is hosting a pop-up mentoring session based on the work done by the [Committee on Gender Equity in Linguistics \(COGEL, formerly COSWL\)](#) to create a platform for mentoring sessions during the Annual Meetings, which will take place in mid-June during the Lavender Languages Institute. For information on becoming a mentor or finding a mentor, contact our COZIL chair Archie Crowley at [acrowley@sc.edu](mailto:acrowley@sc.edu).

We are also excited to announce that a new LSA award will be offered this year to recognize influential work in Linguistics by LGBTQ+ scholars at any career stage. This award, the Arnold Zwicky award, is named for the LSA's first known out President. Details will be shared through the LSA in the coming weeks, including guidelines and information on nominations. Look for that as awards season approaches!

Thank you for your interest in the work COZIL is doing to promote LGBTQ+ scholarship in Linguistics – we hope you enjoy the blog posts we are sharing this month, and encourage you to continue to learn more about queer issues in Linguistics and the important role language has for all understandings of identity and belonging.

In solidarity,

Chris VanderStouwe, Archie Crowley, and Tyler Kibbey (COZIL Chair team)

## Not Here for Performative Activism: Two gay Asian Americans spill the tea

*Andrew Cheng, UC Irvine*

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It has been a tumultuous year for Asian America. The botched governmental response to the COVID-19 pandemic was directly responsible for an increase in hate crimes against people of Asian descent in the United States. Although public scrutiny was sparse in the beginning months of the ordeal, scholars and activists have helped to raise awareness not only about the alarming rise of racially-motivated attacks, but also about the entrenchment of anti-Asian racism in American history. Exclusion and xenophobia have been part and parcel of the Asian experience in America since before American history began.

In January of 2021, we were invited to co-facilitate a teach-in that focused on the intersection of queer and Asian American identities at the LSA Annual Meeting. It was part of a larger workshop, called Room at the Table, that critically analyzed the positionality of Asian Americans in our field. People kept saying that Room at the Table was “so timely” and sorely needed at a time of such high tensions in the Asian American community. Little did we know that January wasn’t the end of it, not even the peak.

On March 16, Xiaoji Tan (49), Daoyou Feng (44), Paul Andre Michels (54), Elcias R. Hernandez-Ortiz (30), Hyun Jung Grant (51), Soon Chung Park (74), Suncha Kim (69), and Yong Ae Yue (63) were murdered by a White gunman in the Atlanta metropolitan area. News media were quick to name and describe the shooter, while the names, faces, and stories of the victims remained unknown. They had families and loved ones; they worked in the spa industry or were its patrons. But the first news stories that broke were about the murderer and his “troubled” background or the social ills of sex work. Writers, editors, and social media users chose to write and share pieces that elevated misogynistic discourses about sex work and dehumanized Asian women.

We want so desperately for Atlanta to be the last time anti-Asian hate crimes make national news. But it won’t be. And it certainly wasn’t the first. We note that it’s June: Pride month, a time to commemorate the Stonewall uprising in 1969. It’s also when we commemorate the life of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American murdered on June 19, 1982, because two White men at a bar near Detroit resented the Japanese auto industry for “stealing” American jobs. We’ve been doing a lot of reflecting.

**Nick: Like many of my Filipino friends, I spoke with my mother after hearing about Vilma Kari, a Filipino American in NYC who was attacked on her way to church. Like Vilma, my mom attends church regularly, even during the week because she’s super Catholic. But after coming up short on advice other than to be careful, I turned to my Asian friends to talk about how to address this issue in our local communities, which includes academia.**

**Andrew: And I’ve been struggling with ways to avoid slipping into performative activism and allyship. I see a lot of that every June, when large corporations buy a Pride float and festoon their logo with rainbows. Come July, their dedication to LGBTQ+ social justice issues has vanished. The queer and Asian communities deserve better, don’t you think?**

The intent of this piece is to expand the discussion we began at Room at the Table on queer and Asian American identity, and to tie it into a reflection on the recent #StopAsianHate movement, in particular its manifestation within academia.

As linguists, we examine the intersection of race and language, account for the historical discourses that inform present-day (socially-construed) “realities”, and, ideally, use our knowledge as the impetus for actual social change. We use queer linguistics as a framework for our analysis, not necessarily because we both identify as queer, but because so much of the societal perception of Asians in America travels through a uniquely gendered and sexualized lens, and queer linguistics can be used to critically examine and deconstruct that lens.

### **Andrew: So let’s start with historical discourses about Asians in America.**

The “model minority” stereotype for Asian Americans is a recent construct. It was first described in 1966 by a White Berkeley sociologist named William Petersen, who used it to explain the cultural “success” of Japanese Americans, in stark contrast to other racial minorities, including Chinese, Filipino, Mexicans, and, with particular emphasis, African Americans (Petersen, 1966; Boderhausen, 2011). This description quickly grew into what we call “model minority logics”, with each instance of Asians managing to climb the economic ladder and resist crime despite systemic oppression strengthening the stereotype of all Asians being smart, hardworking, law-abiding, wealthy, and privileged.

Model minority logic fomented anti-Blackness in Asian and White communities, but in its upholding of White supremacist ideology, it also ended up contributing to Asian disenfranchisement (Kim, 1999; Sue et al., 2007). One of the pernicious consequences of model minority logics has been the conflation of different Asian American experiences into a monolith of imagined economic success, erasing the varied histories of oppression and marginalization that different Asian groups have experienced. Another is the erasure of the long history of Asian American oppression.

Now, the “queer linguistics” framework (Motschenbacher, 2011; Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013; Davis et al. 2014) insists that we use intersectional lenses to analyze and solve problems: this includes academic problems (e.g., how do drag artists use their voices and language to play with gender?) and the very real problems we face in society (e.g., why is it important to focus our discourse on the safety of black trans women specifically?). The queer linguistic pursuit, writes William Leap, “leads into a broader interrogation of structures of normative authority and regulatory power” (Leap 2015:662). It means looking at how gender and sexuality were wielded in the discourse of labeling and othering Asian Americans, and also at how Asian Americans can be invoked to deconstruct the boxes in which we tend to find ourselves placed.

By taking a queer turn, we see how the original treatment of Asians stemmed from hegemonic and heteronormative ideologies of White masculinity (Connell, 2005), not just xenophobia. Long before they were regarded as a model minority, Chinese men who immigrated to the West Coast during the Gold Rush of the 1800s were said to “lack a gender” because they did both “boys work and girls work” (Wu, 2021) and did not embody the characteristics of an ideal American man (Lee, 2003). Following decades of neo-imperialist wars waged by American and European powers in Asian nations (e.g., Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam), the hypersexualization and fetishization of Asian women became a cultural trope, known as Yellow Fever (Uchida, 1998; Prasso & Prassol, 2005; Zheng, 2016; Hiramoto & Pua, 2019).

Sixty years on, model minority logics continue to uphold a patriarchal and White supremacist ideology (Chou & Feagin, 2015). This logic states that Asian Americans achieve by keeping quiet and working hard; they are accommodating and invisible and thereby harmless. Asians are neutralized as a threat to political order because they are perceived as achieving the American Dream without challenging the White, heteronormative status quo. The modern Asian American man is still considered sexless and emasculated. The modern Asian American woman still exotified, painted as submissive and thought of as disposable. Our Asian American elders are seen as defenseless.

**Nick: Speaking of masculinity, I had the lovely experience of living in a hypermasculine environment before I started at Georgetown. I served in the Navy during Don't Ask Don't Tell, a time when LGBTQ+ service members could not serve openly. I remember being told I was too articulate and that I needed to "man up." I felt it was harder to hide being gay because I was Asian. Now, in academia, I worry I'm not articulate enough and that I'm also not "gay/queer enough" because of my military experience.**

And some Asian Americans have wholly bought into model minority logic. Some of us imagine that we are indeed "a homogenous and self-sufficient community in no particular need of assistance or support" (Eng & Han, 2018). We might take pride in the "positive stereotypes" while not recognizing how they undermine our agency (Siy & Cheryan, 2013).

**Andrew: Ever heard of "boba liberalism"? It's a twist on neoliberalism, but for wealthy Asians -- usually East Asians -- who totally buy into the promise of capitalism and take pride in having "made it" in the US. The boba liberal lacks a critical understanding of what circumstances beyond one's own hard work makes success possible and doesn't seek economic justice, only personal gain and shallow cultural and political representation. Not sure why "boba" got attached to it though. Taiwan pride aside, I'm personally not a fan: even when you ask for no sugar, there's too much sugar.**

Perhaps there is some hope that economic achievement will come hand-in-hand with cultural capital. A kind of politics of respectability is in play here: if we Asians are unproblematic, we'll be accepted. Shame on the "bad Asians" who don't measure up; shame on those who rock the boat and make it harder for the rest of us to get ahead. But it sounds an awful lot like the internalized homophobia of the late 20th century, when those who were gay had to act straight to be accepted, and those who couldn't pass as straight had to be perfect in every other way. The gayness was seen as a liability. We had to be golden in order not to be perceived as a threat.

And yet, the acceptance is conditional. All it takes, it seems, is one discursive act of connecting a dangerous virus to East Asia, and the glitter of neoliberal tolerance and acceptance of all races is abruptly blown away. “The worst kind of liberalism, really,” says Louis in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, is “bourgeois tolerance, and what I think is that what AIDS shows us is the limits of tolerance, that it’s not enough to be tolerated, because when the shit hits the fan you find out how much tolerance is worth. Nothing.”

So when COVID-19 hit the fan, Asian Americans saw the limits of tolerance, and the consequences were deadly. #StopAsianHate arose as a response, and in response to this response, the country’s current progressive paragons, academic institutions, rushed in to defend their Asians -- but mostly their own reputations.

Pardon the shade. We commend institutions who publicly took a stand against racism and admire the commitment to demonstrate solidarity. We are less enthused about the many emails we have received that rehash the trauma of the latest anti-Asian assault, connect it to systemic racism, offer a verbal commitment to anti-racism, and link to outside organizations that are doing the actual policy and community care work. And we are not at all enthused about any of the implications in formal communications that all anti-Asian hate is recent, that it is the same, and that continuing to churn out emails and nothing else constitutes an appropriate response. There is another binary that has arisen in the past decade, and progressive institutions desperately want to be on the “woke” side of it without undergoing the critical analysis necessary to get there.

We’re calling now for an intersectional approach to mitigating the ongoing violence against Asians and Asian Americans, which is what distinguishes proactively anti-racist institutions from those that remain compliant to their own self-interest. The compliant institution hires an Asian person for the sake of representation, but does not acknowledge the unique challenges they faced to get there or provide them with adequate resources for continued success. The anti-racist institution not only provides the person of color said resources, but understands how their multifaceted experiences of inequity are integral to the group, connects the dots, and deconstructs the barriers that made entry inequitable in the first place.

So: a few suggestions from two cisgender gay Asian American men -- we don’t presume to speak for all Asians or all queer people -- on how to do better. First, in the realm of institutional responses, we appreciate language that avoids flattening Asian communities. Please disaggregate. It is important to demonstrate that those who hold institutional power understand that there is no monolith; that the needs of the Sikh community following a mass shooting are different from the needs of Chinese elders in San Francisco following a string of unprovoked physical assaults, because of differing histories and social contexts. We advocate for acknowledging the historical and explicitly political usefulness of categorical labels such as “Asian American” (which was vital for panethnic coalition-building during the Civil Rights Movement) while recognizing that terms can and must change and evolve. Other ways of imagining community and political organizing will come for Asian Americans, and we should welcome their contributions when they arrive.

Second, we ask for more authentic commitment to anti-racist actions, not just lip service to the anti-racist ideal. Now, it might look like the loudest voices in the anti-racism space keep “moving



the goalposts” for when true justice is achieved. Acknowledgment is good, but not enough. Funding workshops is good, but not enough. Cracking down on hate speech is good, but not enough. Updating hiring practices is good, but not enough. Abolishing the police is good, but not enough. It’s tempting to look at this and think, “There is no telos.” But that is precisely the point. To do more, to do better, takes work. Radical work. “We will not accept listening sessions or open forums,” writes Johnathan Flowers, “because we recognize them for what they are: incremental change that presents the illusion of a response while allowing the institution to keep whiteness in place” (Flowers, 2020).

Justice and equality for LGBTQ+ communities in the United States has also undergone constant change, with different battles waged in different eras (legal recognition, marriage rights, anti-discrimination laws, and a struggle against police brutality from the very start), because there is no one monolithic LGBTQ+ community, either. Also note that we’re not talking about this as if incremental change is the only method, as if the needs of White, upper-class cisgender gay men had to be met first before we moved on to other marginalized groups. No, movements for social justice don’t progress in a linear fashion; and no, Asians don’t fit into any hierarchy; and no, queer people will not conform to the desires of institutions; and yes, we are going to keep moving the goalposts. What will you do when #StopAsianHate and #BLM stop trending? When AAPI Heritage Month and Pride Month are over? The leaders of the progressive movement update the goals as society changes. They never rest on their laurels, because they are committed to a vision of the future that does not necessitate that accretion of institutional power.

So, finally, we ask for the most subversive thing of all: for the institution to take a long, hard look at itself and ask what it has done historically, and what it continues to do today, that stands in the way of liberation for the most marginalized people in its immediate social context. This is a tough one, because institutions almost by definition need to rely on a sense of self-preservation, whereas queer deconstruction seems to fly in the face of that. Can an institution even continue to exist if, for example, it fully commits to reparations for the racial injustice that seeded its endowment? Can academia, if identified as a structure of power complicit in racial inequality (Rosa & Flores, 2017), dismantle itself? One of the benefits of the queer approach is that after deconstruction, we are freed to completely reimagine what we began with, whether that is a reimagined gender identity or a reimagined model for higher education. Take it from the Asian Americans, who have been troubling the binaries from the very beginning.

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## How linguistics is engaging with trans activism

*Aris Keshav, UC Santa Barbara*

If you're reading this, you've probably already encountered transgender linguistic activism. When people introduce themselves, for example, it's increasingly common to share pronouns and ask what others use, instead of assuming the best way to refer to them based on appearance. Making self-identification an everyday practice is one of trans activism's most visible recent victories, particularly on campuses, and language is at the center of that change.

**As linguists, we are particularly well placed to support the ongoing movement for trans rights.** This is a brief survey of some current linguistics research that engages with transgender activism. There are all kinds of interactions between academia and activism: some document trans linguistic activism, others draw on linguistic expertise to inform activist discourse, and still others apply linguistics to develop practical interventions. Many also engage with trans activism to advance the state of linguistic knowledge. From syntax to sociolinguistics, and corpus linguistics to phonetics, scholars draw on trans discourse and experience to challenge our understanding of how language works.

**Linguists studying trans people isn't new, but what's new and growing is the number of trans linguists studying ourselves.** That's important, because cisgender linguists have long imposed their own biases onto trans communities, resulting in misinterpretation (at best) and harmful transphobic discourse posing as linguistic findings at worst. One recent example is Kulick's description (footnote:) of "transpeople as the self-appointed arbiters of gendered language", causing everyone to "not laugh as much" as before (1).[1] He argues that trans linguistic activism results from trans people needing to pay "meticulous attention [...] to their language, so that they might receive confirmation of their gendered identity from others" (2). Not misgendering ourselves, he writes, is a "precious achievement" (2). This is far from the

experience of most trans people. Moreover, it misses the point: trans linguistic activism isn't about monitoring our own language, it's about asking for basic respect from others. His characterization of trans people as humorless and uptight is demeaning, but nothing new: just another person punching down by accusing others of being too politically correct.

**Linguists have long been uneasy about linguistic reform.** From the beginning, our field has been shaped by a desire to be respected as a science. Based on a misconception of scientific fields as politically and culturally neutral, many have wished the same neutrality onto linguistics. However, linguistics has never been neutral. Increasingly, scholars are recognizing the effects of our own cultural situatedness and that of our predecessors in the field. The [Natives4Linguistics](#) project, for example, places the values and methods of contemporary linguistics in comparison with Native American understandings of language, revealing fundamental differences based on culture.

Another source of resistance is the equation of linguistic reform to oppression. Recently, some linguists have described the trans activist promotion of singular "they" as oppressive linguistic reform. However, not all linguistic reform is inherently oppressive. "Ms.", for example, was successfully introduced as an alternative to "Miss" and "Mrs." that did not reveal a person's marital status. Others have deemed requests to use singular "they" a kind of prescriptivism. However, what is the real prescriptivism? Many people use "singular they" to communicate every day. To argue against it on the basis of grammatical purity is perhaps the real prescriptivism.

**Often, arguments against singular "they" are simply dressed-up transphobia.** Recent research shows that a person's attitude to singular "they" is correlated to their overall attitudes towards trans people.[2] Age is a large factor: younger people are more likely to use singular "they" and to accept it as sounding grammatical.

**Many trans people draw on popular linguistic ideologies in response to transphobic discourse.** For example, many non-binary people draw on historical use (singular "they" has been used for centuries) and lexical definition (the dictionary says that "they" can be singular) to legitimize their pronoun choice.[3] **As linguists, we are in a unique position of power to guide the discourse** (cf [Konnolly and Cowper 2020](#)). Singular "they" is more than a linguistic curiosity: pronouncements on its grammaticality have [consequences](#) for trans and non-binary lives.

**Linguists are also documenting trans and non-binary innovations in languages beyond English.** In Spanish, singular "they" is [best translated](#) with innovative [affixes](#): "elle" (/e.ʎe/) or "ellx" (/e.ʎeks/). In Québec and France, the non-binary pronoun "iel" /jɛl/ (a blend of "il" and "elle") has [soared](#) in popularity, as well as blends like "celui" (a blend of feminine demonstrative pronoun "celle" and the masculine "celui"). In written language, which is often more gendered than spoken, many use "." to create gender-neutral forms (e.g. "mon ami.e", "je suis chanceux.se"). [German speakers](#) have a diversity of [strategies](#) including the innovative pronouns "xier" and simply "x". Others use borrowed English "they" pronouns while speaking German.

**There are trans and gender non-conforming people speaking every living language.** The fact that linguists have focused predominantly on English and a sampling of European languages is more evidence for the cultural situatedness of linguistics as a field. Do we need more research on innovations in less studied languages? Yes, but we must also recognize that trans people worldwide have different relationships to language. Even among English speakers, pronouns are not always equally important to everyone, based on class, race, education, and individual preference. Any study of asking pronouns, for example, should recognize that the practice is often restricted to university campuses and radical spaces, which are not equally accessible to everyone.

Linguists can draw on our expertise to guide and support trans activist discourse. For example, Lal Zimman (2017) brings self-identification together with the sociolinguistic concept of intersubjectivity. In addition to the way that someone identifies their own gender, the way that people perceive and interact with that individual is also important. Moreover, the way that others accept a trans person's self-identified gender is deeply affected by their class, visible (non-)conformity, and other factors. Trans people know this, but it isn't always reflected in our public discourse.

**Bodies and gender are often naturalized in ways that trans people challenge by our existence.** The way that we name ourselves and our bodies can challenge normative links between body parts and gender identity, building coherence and desirability.[4] Within linguistics, scholars often ascribe gender differences in the voice to biological variation. However, these differences are sometimes created by our own tools: changing the settings from “male” to “female” on automatic formant analysis, for example, sometimes produces different results for the same audio.[5] Many researchers are turning their attention to voices which challenge simplistic categorization. Lily Clifford is currently building a corpus of transfeminine people's voices over the course of the voice feminization process. Others have examined non-binary voices: how speakers **alter** their voice depending on their environment, and how people combine linguistic features with clothing to create non-binary gendered **styles**.

**The need to address race in language, gender, and sexuality is becoming more pressing,** as articulated by Trechter (2003) and others. As Trechter notes, race is rarely mentioned in analyses (or even the titles of papers) unless the participants are of a marked category. Nearly all the studies mentioned here focus on white trans communities, but do not critically examine race. If the growing field of trans linguistics aims to unsettle oppressive systems of power, rather than uphold them, then race must become more central in our analyses.

Many of the rights promoted by trans activists actually benefit everyone, not just trans people. For example, trans activists have drawn wider attention to the importance of respecting a person's name and pronouns. This has encouraged native English speakers to be more respectful of how to pronounce names with non-English linguistic origins. It has also highlighted the need to respect the pronouns of gender non-conforming people who often get misgendered, without necessarily identifying as transgender, such as butch lesbians.

Likewise, **linguists of all fields can benefit from engaging with trans activism.** Language is complex, systematic, and uniquely human; and the beauty of that is what draws many linguists to the field. In order to understand language, we must at some level understand humans. Trans

communities have developed precise and productive ways to think about gender, which structures human societies and shapes our individual lives. Gender, along with other systems of human identity and power, is inextricable from language. Engaging with activist knowledge production is, therefore, an invaluable way to advance linguistic research.

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# Queering the military: Doing “being a heterosexual” during Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell

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This year, service members in the United States Armed Forces celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the implementation of the [Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell \(DADT\) repeal act of 2010](#), the discriminatory policy that prohibited lesbian, gay, and bisexual service members from serving openly.

When I applied to the [U.S. Naval Academy](#), I did not know (and could not have known) what I was getting into. I knew I was gay. However, I did not know how doing “being gay” could lead me to getting kicked out or discharged from the Navy. And, apparently among the endless paperwork, I signed a form ([USMEPCOM FORM 601-23-4-E 1, FEB 1998](#)) agreeing that I did not have a “propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts” or to marry “a person known to

be of the same biological sex.” Today, I still wonder how I could have known what being gay meant as a 17-year-old graduating from high school, and how I would have to perform “being a heterosexual” under DADT.

It was 2002 when I joined the Navy, and DADT was still the law. While policies affecting LGBT service members have changed, the U.S. military is still very much a masculine gendered institution and arguably the arbiter of American masculinity (Disler, 2008). Historically, the ranks of the U.S. military have consisted of “able-bodied” ([10 U.S. Code § 505](#)) men; and social practices and cultures continue to systematically exclude women as well as individuals who identify as LGBT from serving. However, the U.S. military is still one of the most diverse institutions and workplaces in the U.S., with 1.3 million active-duty service members (Kamarck, 2019). Of these, an estimated 6%, or 78,000, identify as either gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and 0.6%, or 7800, identify as transgender (Meadows et al., 2015).

It might not be a surprise that the military conflates the experiences of all those who identify as LGBT. However, I want to briefly disentangle their histories in the military. For LGB service members, the U.S. military began actively discriminating against them during WWII when homosexuality was pathologized as a mental illness (see Berube, [2010]). During the gay rights movement of the 1970s, activists brought attention to supporting LGB service members (Hall, 2010). However, the U.S. Department of Defense came down with a heavy hand in 1982, declaring that homosexuality was “incompatible with military service” ([DOD Directive 1332.14, January 28, 1982, Part 1, Section H](#)). A “[compromise](#)” was met in 1993 when President Clinton enacted DADT. This meant that LGB service members could serve, just not openly. Then, in 2010, President Obama repealed DADT, allowing LGB service members to finally serve as their true selves.

For our transgender brothers, sisters, and siblings in arms, much of their history has been ignored or erased under the LGBT umbrella. While women were known to disguise themselves as men to serve in the military since the [American Revolution](#), transgender service members were actively discriminated against alongside LGB service members. Then, in 2014, Attorney General Eric Holder extended gender identity protection under TITLE VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to include transgender statuses. However, while this did apply to DoD civilians, it did not apply to service members (Kamarck, 2019). In 2015, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, under the Obama administration, announced that [transgender service members can serve openly](#). This was short lived, as President Trump [reversed the decision and prohibited transgender individuals from joining and serving in the military](#). Trump’s trans ban was then [overturned by President Biden](#) in 2021.

When I joined the Navy during DADT, I did not know the consequences of what Rich (1980) calls compulsory heterosexuality. Like the other 1.3 million service members, I swore an oath to defend the constitution (and also claimed to be straight). For example, when I was a plebe (1st year student/midshipman at the Naval Academy), I was told to bring a (female) date to lunch. As midshipmen, we ate breakfast and lunch with our squads. Our squads were led by squad leaders (4th year students/midshipmen) who were also responsible for training us as plebes. One day, my squad leader told me I had to bring a date to lunch. So that morning, I asked a female midshipman if she would join me for lunch. Doing so also required me to “request permission” from the female midshipman’s squad leader, thereby forcing me to perform “being

heterosexual” by participating in heterosexual courtship, or what Eckert (2000) calls the heterosexual marketplace.

Let’s not ignore how problematic this was for the female midshipman. From her perspective, we can see clearly how compulsory heterosexuality ingrained in the masculine gendered military has misogynistic implications on her military identity. By being asked to join me for lunch, she performed “being a commodity” or object of desire, thereby reducing/erasing her identity as a midshipman. Further, her agency as a woman and individual was diminished by drawing on patriarchal requirements (a man asking her squad leader for permission to bring her as his date).

I have to note – the woman I asked was and is a friend. At the time, she did not know I was gay. However, we both understood these rituals were “normal” and on some level a form of hazing. We could have easily said no. But, by not participating in these rituals, our student rankings would suffer given that upper-level students ranked everyone below them. These student rankings then contributed to our overall order of merit which informed what jobs in the Navy/ Marine Corps we would hold after graduation/commissioning.

As I recall this one instance of compulsory heterosexuality (there are many), I am relieved to know that midshipmen at the Naval Academy (and service members writ large) are in a better place. However, policy changes do not equate to changes in social and cultural practices. The U.S. military is still a masculine gendered institution and compulsory heterosexuality still exists. Today, I might have had the option to bring a male midshipman to lunch - however it would still entail the same ritual of heteronormative courtship. Another example: while the term “military wife” has been replaced with “military spouse,” it still draws on the same heterosexual and patriarchal construct. All spouses are still assumed under the umbrella term “military dependents.” This umbrella term also includes children of service members. In this way, the term “military spouse” still draws on the patriarchal construct where the service member (usually a heterosexual man) is the protector, or “breadwinner,” of the family. And so, these are just two examples where, from a queer theory and queer linguistics lens (Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013), we can examine not only how LGBT service members “do” (military) heterosexuality, but also how straight-identifying individuals do a heterosexuality that might not be their own.

Returning to my question in the first paragraph - how could I have known the implications of being gay in the military during DADT? I still don’t know. However, I do know why I joined the military. I grew up in a military family. My dad served in the Army and I saw the opportunities it afforded him as a Filipino immigrant. And then September 11th happened when I was a junior in high school, and I followed the “call to serve.” For other service members, reasons may also include occupational benefits such as opportunities to travel, access to educational and healthcare benefits, as well as job stability (Helmus et al., 2018). Today, my military experience informs my research and my desire to continue serving in some capacity. I envision my new capacity for service as I conduct research surrounding queering military discourse and deconstructing (toxic) masculinities and heteronormativity seen in the military, aiming to make it a safer place for everyone to serve as their true selves.

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