

You guys, y'all, and queer and trans language

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In college, I would often hear someone get corrected for using *you guys* to refer to a group of people who were not, literally, “guys.” This is a stereotypically Berkeley™ thing to do, but it’s also a practice that emerges in the day-to-day lives of many English users.

For my Master’s thesis,¹ I’ve been digging into discourses around *you guys* and its sibling pronoun *y’all*. I gathered a collection of items where people talk about how *you guys* and/or *y’all* are or should be used, which included newspaper and magazine articles, videos, blog posts, songs, and books, as well as academic publications (linguists have ideologies about language too!) Because this post is for pride month 🏳️‍🌈, I’m going to talk about two dimensions of *you guys* and *y’all* I found that are relevant for queer and trans language.

***You guys* as misgendering**

One of the most common lines of argumentation in the collection I gathered is that using *you guys* as a generic (i.e. genderless) pronoun is sexist. Because *guy(s)* still exists as a gendered word, and because masculine words are typically used as generic forms, generic *you guys* is symbolic of—and, it is argued, contributes to—the social privileging of men. This line of argumentation is referred to by many authors in my collection.

Trans and nonbinary people also have a stake in gendered language because of its potential to *misgender*, or refer to someone with terms that don’t align with their gender. This [can have consequences for trans and non-binary people’s mental health and well-being](#). Trans women and [transfeminine](#) people represented in the collection for my project typically voice that they feel the gendered-ness of *you guys*, even when the word is intended to be generic, because of their experiences being misgendered. This means that it’s possible for a person to use *you guys* in a way that is (in their mind) not gendered, but which is experienced by another person as an act of misgendering. This highlights the importance of context and personal history—not everyone necessarily experiences *you guys* as a gendered word, and some people are more vulnerable than others to its potential harm.

***Y’all* as an LGBTQ+-inclusive form**

Y’all is often suggested as a substitute for *you guys*. [A 2023 study by Broderick McCurdy](#) found that, because of this, some people are coming to associate *y’all* with progressive/pro-LGBTQ+

¹ Bedin, Cooper A. (2024) “A tale of two pronouns”: Race, place, gender, and the indexical tangle of you guys and y’all. University of California, Santa Barbara M.A. thesis. Currently not available online—if you want to read my thesis once it’s available, email cbedin@ucsb.edu, or check online in a couple weeks!

politics. However, many commentators in my collection also claim that *y'all's* association with the stigmatized varieties Southern American English (SAE) and African American English (AAE) may inhibit its adoption as a universal “inclusive” second-person plural pronoun. Furthermore, progressive stereotypes about the US South imagine the region as uniquely conservative, homophobic, and transphobic. So, there is a kind of contradiction between non-Southern, non-Black progressives wanting to use *y'all* as an inclusive pronoun, while simultaneously imagining the South as ideologically backwards.

This narrative overlooks that Southerners are **already** using *y'all* to do progressive, pro-LGBTQ+ political and identity work within the US South (as [Archie Crowley's dissertation](#) explores)—for example, through the phrase “y'all means all.” “Y'all means all,” in addition to being a [political slogan](#), is also a [song by Miranda Lambert](#) in collaboration with the show *Queer Eye*, a [collection of writings by queer Appalachian scholars, artists, and activists](#), and a [campaign by the Southern Poverty Law Center](#) encouraging legal action against anti-LGBTQ+ hate groups and legislation in the US South.



*A printable sign from the
Southern Poverty Law Center's
“Y'all Means All” campaign.*

In a Southern/Appalachian context, the LGBTQ+ meaning of *y'all* in “y'all means all” doesn't come from *y'all* being a substitute for *you guys*, but rather from the *all*-ness that's already a part of the word. “Y'all means all” doesn't de-link *y'all* from its Southernness, but rather highlights and uses that connection to invoke queer and trans presence in the US South. The slogan then also becomes available as a tool to resist legislative oppression of queer and trans folks in the South.

Ok so Cooper which of these words can *I* specifically use??

Many of the items in the collection I gathered for my thesis aimed to provide a clear and specific recommendation for whether it's more appropriate to use *you guys* or *y'all*, but I think it would misrepresent the complexity of *you guys* and *y'all* to offer my own simple resolution. However, there are some helpful things I've learned through this project.

Context matters a lot. I'm inclined to prioritize people's felt experiences, and if you're in a group of women or a group of trans people and everyone is using *you guys* and no one's concerned about it, it may not be perceived as misgendering or exclusionary. However, if a trans friend (or really anyone) expresses to you that *you guys* makes them uncomfortable, then it's simple to respect that wish. Similarly, if you're in a space (e.g. a workplace) that's typically dominated by men, consider how *you guys* would affect the experiences of non-men.

Thinking about *y'all* through a queer and trans lens invites us to interrogate how the US South is often talked about in progressive spaces. Talking about the US South as though it's a hellscape where no queer or trans person could possibly stand living doesn't represent the complex reality of queer and trans life in the South, and it's not helpful to the queer and trans folks who live there. The complexity of *y'all* invites us to refocus on the experiences and actions of queer and trans Southerners, and their modes of resistance in response to the ever-increasing legislative danger for queer and trans people across the United States, especially in the South. Most importantly, *y'all* invites us to think about the importance of solidarity in resisting queer- and transphobia, because it matters for everyone.