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# "THE PRONOUNS EXIST!": LINGUISTIC EXISTENCE IN THE BORDERLANDS AS A U.S. NON-BINARY ADOLESCENT HERITAGE LEARNER OF SPANISH

**Abstract:**

Debates about teaching inclusive Spanish are frequently simplified into a false binary, in which linguistic evolutions advocated by trans and queer communities are framed as opposite to the linguistic conservativism of Spanish-speaking communities in the United States. However, non-binary heritage learners of Spanish live, learn, and speak in Spanish, in both school and family contexts. For these individuals, gender-neutral language implicates not only recognition of their individual identity, but also access to community and belonging. Grounded in Anzaldúa's (1987) conceptualization of the borderlands, this paper presents the qualitative case study of a non-binary, adolescent heritage learner of Spanish working to affirm their existence within the binary paradigms of boy/girl and native/non-native Spanish speaker. Thematic analysis of interview, focus group, and survey data reveals multiple contextual forces at play in the student's understanding of who and what has the right to "exist" in Spanish. These include ideologies such as native speakerism and linguistic prescriptivism, as well as local factors such as positioning as a student/non-expert and access to affirming peer community. The study illustrates the stakes of language and representation for trans, non-binary, and heritage learners and offers implications for researchers and language educators.

**Keywords:** Borderlands ◆ heritage language learners ◆ LGBTQ+ ◆ non-binary language learners ◆ Spanish language education ◆ pronouns

## Introduction

For marginalized communities across the United States, language is used as a tool for identity-based violence, dictating who may speak and who can be spoken about. "English-only" movements use language as a proxy to mobilize racism and xenophobia, from politicians' decrees to grassroots hate crimes against speakers of languages other than English (e.g., Goldmacher, 2016; Levenson, 2020). Monolingual ideology and misinformation about bilingualism contribute to eroding quality bilingual education, negatively impacting immigrant and non-white families and Spanish-speakers in particular (e.g., Sánchez-Muñoz & Amezcua, 2019). At the same time, laws such as HB 1557 in Florida, nicknamed the "Don't Say Gay" bill by opponents, threaten to make LGBTQ+ identities unspeakable among teachers and students under a certain age. Many states have passed or are considering "pronoun laws," or legislation to regulate the names and pronouns that can be used to refer to students at school, a mandated misgendering that causes violence to trans and non-binary youth by intentionally denying their identities (Pendharkar, 2023).

While it is clear that "both" U.S. Spanish-speaking and LGBTQ+ communities are attacked through the conservative linguistic ideologies described, this dual framing causes a notable problem: it erases the intersection between the two identity-based groups, effectively framing them as mutually exclusive. A lack of statistics renders impossible to provide an exact count of Spanish-speaking youth in the U.S. who are transgender and non-binary, a fact which further underscores the erasure of this intersection. It is relevant to note that according to the U.S. census, approximately one quarter of U.S. youth are classified as Hispanic or Latino (National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families, 2021), and 2% of U.S. high school students are estimated to be gender non-binary (Johns et al., 2019). Perspectives of queer and trans speakers of Spanish are consistently absent from public discourse, a notable exclusion as pertains to the evolution and use of gender-neutral Spanish. The term *Latinx*, for example, commonly used in U.S. academic settings as a gender-neutral alternative to *Latino* (grammatically masculine) and *Latina* (grammatically feminine), is unknown to and unused by a majority of the group it purports to describe (Pew Research Center, 2020). In one opinion piece, an opponent called the term *Latinx* and the *-x* morpheme "lexical imperialism" on the part of Anglo Americans, stating: "the fact that our community is so offended by this term tells you who this term is for, and it's not us" (Eduardo, 2021, para. 6). The author's use of the pronouns "our" and "us" exemplifies the widespread false binary between U.S. Spanish speakers and LGBTQ+ communities, excluding the possibility that trans and non-binary users of gender-neutral language exist within Spanish-speaking communities. Yet at the risk of

stating the obvious, non-binary Spanish-speakers exist, speak, are spoken about, and go to school.

Intersectionality theory points to the importance of examining the intersections of identity categories such as race and gender, given the complex effects of power as they operate for multiply marginalized individuals and the tendency of single-identity lenses to erase these experiences and impacts (Block & Corona, 2016; Crenshaw, 1987). What ideologies and power dynamics are at play for non-binary adolescent heritage learners of Spanish in their family, peer, and classroom settings? What factors might impact these students' ability to "exist" and express themselves through the languages they speak? This paper seeks to shed light on these questions through a participatory research project known as the Non-Binary Language Alliance (NBLA), which engaged non-binary high school learners of French and Spanish in the U.S. in a semester-long online community for social support, language learning, and artistic creation (Spiegelman, forthcoming). The present study focuses on a 17-year-old non-binary Cuban-American student called "Cherry" (a pseudonym), who lives in a large Spanish-speaking community in the South of the United States and studies Spanish as a world language at school.

Given the scarcity of non-binary Spanish speakers in language education research, I will review relevant background following two approaches, first examining the ideological context of Spanish heritage and world language education in the U.S., followed by a brief overview of research related to non-binary language identities in Spanish learning contexts. I will next introduce Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *borderlands* to situate the normative constraints structuring Cherry's intersectional identity positioning and to justify a collaborative research approach grounded in queer feminisms. After an introduction to the participant, including their context, understanding of their own identity, and language practices, I will draw from Cherry's accounts of their own experiences to identify five themes that structured their linguistic "existence" in Spanish across contexts, with their family, with friends, and in the Spanish classroom. After a discussion of the language ideologies impacting Cherry's positioning and capacity for action, I will close with recommendations for language teachers and researchers.

**Background**

The varied, intersectional facets of individuals' identities are profoundly implicated in processes of language learning (Block, 2007; Kramsch, 2009; Norton, 2013; Potowski, 2012). The invisibility of trans and non-binary heritage language learners in research necessitates a review of the separate bodies of literature specific to each identifier.

The present study understands heritage language learners (HLs) in the United States, according to Valdés' (2001) proficiency-based definition, as students enrolled in world language classrooms who possess, due to consistent exposure in homes where a non-English language is spoken, an ability to communicate in or simply comprehend both the non-English language and English. HLs of Spanish are uniquely positioned in Spanish world language classroom settings by competing ideologies. On one hand, native speaker norms grant HLs power and authority: they may be viewed as advantaged in comparison to peers without background in the target language. However, the monolingual native speaker model often frames HLs as deficient due to natural aspects of their bilingualism, such as the use of familiar over formal registers, translanguaging practices, and variation between their communication abilities, modes, and practices in the two languages—in other words, deviation from the idealized model of bilingualism as a perfect "educated" speaker in two equal, parallel, separate languages (Train, 2007; Valdés, 2001).

HLs are also impacted by language ideologies regarding standardization and variation, with impacts and implications on identity (Potowski, 2012). Geographic varieties of Spanish are granted different levels of prestige, with varieties of Spanish spoken in the Caribbean often perceived as least "correct" by U.S. Spanish speakers, including by speakers of these varieties (Zentella 2002). Judgments about linguistic correctness are often linked to and code for unspoken bias about race, class, and education level (Zentella, 2002). In the world language classroom, U.S. varieties of Spanish are frequently absent, if not subject to explicit stigma and correction (Burns, 2018). Despite their multilingual competencies, HLs may therefore experience a sense of shame for not speaking "correct Spanish" or not being "really bilingual." Ali (2021) observes the close connection between linguistic competence and identity for Spanish HLs, arguing that the deficit linguistic identity can extend to a felt "identity deficit" (p. 20), as "the use of a monolingual model for measuring bilingual HL speakers' proficiency is also used as a yardstick for Latinx identity" (p. 5). HLs are therefore situated on the margins, occupying dual identity positions as Spanish speakers and English speakers, fully accepted as neither.

Like HLs, non-binary individuals occupy a liminal space that merits further attention within dominant paradigms of language learning. While *non-binary* can be defined as an individual who identifies neither as exclusively girl/woman nor boy/man, it should not be reduced to a "third gender" category (e.g., *he/she/they*). Rather, non-binary is a term encompassing a constellation of possible identifications that may be unrelated to named categories and linguistic options such as pronouns. As Knisely and Paiz (2021) write:

> For non-binary people, existing paradigms must be completely deconstructed; gender must be described as a collection of potential identities that include maleness, femaleness, and infinite other possibilities that do not necessarily have any relation thereto. Non-binary is itself an umbrella term that encompasses myriad identity positions[.] (Knisely & Paiz, 2021, p. 26)

For trans and non-binary individuals, the stakes of language are high. Misgendering, or being referred to or classified as a gender that does not align with one's identity, is experienced differently by different trans and non-binary individuals and is widely considered to be a form of symbolic violence (Kapusta, 2019). Experiences of misgendering are correlated with negative affect and self-worth for transgender individuals (McLemore, 2015) as well as an increased risk of suicide attempts among trans youth (Russell et al., 2018; The Trevor Project, 2020). For non-binary language learners, being misgendered in the classroom can inflict emotional harm and even cause students to quit learning the language entirely (Spiegelman, 2022). Knisely and Paiz (2021) argue that the omission of trans and non-binary identities in language curriculum harms all students, as this "equates to an erasure of these lives, simultaneously rendering true inclusivity impossible and failing to present learners with a complete picture of the target culture(s) and language(s)" (p. 27).

Anthropological, sociological, and sociolinguistic literature in *jotería studies,* "an academic field evolving at the intersection of Chicanx, Latinx, queer of color, and transgender studies" (Alvarez & Estrada, 2019, p. 863), has drawn attention to previously overlooked expressions of queerness in U.S. Spanish-speaking communities (e.g., Cashman, 2018; Pérez, 2012). However, trans and non-binary identities and experiences remain marginal in research in Spanish language education. Emergent work focused on non-binary identities and Spanish language education has tended to fall into one of three categories. First, there has been a structural focus on describing grammatical gender, paired with accounts of linguistic evolutions for gender-neutral language in Spanish, including gender-neutral innovations such as the gender-neutral neopronoun *elle* and corresponding *-e* ending (e.g., Papadopoulos, 2022). Second, sociolinguistic research is beginning to investigate attitudes and ideologies towards gendered and non-gendered forms, including analyzing censure from linguistic authorities such as the *Real Academia Española* and measuring popular attitudes towards and intelligibility of gender-neutral forms in the U.S. and in countries where Spanish is an official language (e.g., Bonnin & Coronel, 2021; Thompson & Martinez, 2022). A third focus promotes inclusive teaching practices and advocates for the teaching of gender-neutral language for the inclusion of trans and non-binary students (e.g., Díaz et al., 2022; Parra & Serafini, 2021).

In one of only two studies that represent the experiences of non-binary learners of Spanish, Baros (2021) recounts that two such learners, "Blaise" and "Alex," both L1 speakers of English learning Spanish at a university, opted to use either exclusively masculine or exclusively feminine descriptors to describe themselves. These students "each expressed dissatisfaction [with a lack of non-gendered options presented in their classes] mitigated by more emotional distance between gendered language in a second language compared to their first" (p. 10). Moore et al. (2024) report that one non-binary high school student of Spanish, "Tegan," an English L1 speaker who, like Cherry, participated in the NBLA, similarly experienced frustration at an explicit lack of gender-neutral options in their classroom. Tegan additionally identified their teacher's authoritative attitude as a major obstacle to authentic self-expression, as the teacher/student power dynamic precluded even asking questions about gender neutrality in Spanish. After being publicly corrected by the teacher for choosing affirming language to refer to themself in Spanish, Tegan opted to self-misgender in front of the teacher to avoid further conflict, but to mix masculine and feminine forms in the comfort of pair activities and non-graded writing as a subtle way to affirm their identity.

Together, these studies suggest that while binary grammatical gender may pose a challenge to non-binary learners of Spanish, it does not singularly determine their relationship to the language. Rather, learners' positionality relative to their status as an L1/L2 user, the degree of their power as a student, aspects of their particular classroom environment, and the choices that students make, may all play a role in the possibilities at their disposal. Due to the absence of the accounts of non-binary L1 speakers of Spanish, it is unclear how non-binary HLs' experiences in Spanish class might differ from those of L2 learners, based the individual's relationship to Spanish in terms of emotion, identity, language ideology, belonging, and extracurricular language use, and on variations in other aspects of their context. The present study offers a small step towards filling this gap.

**Theoretical framework**

This study is rooted in the theorization of the *borderlands* developed by lesbian Chicana philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa who, like Cherry, sought to understand her own gender, sexuality, language, and ethnicity within binary paradigms that threatened to erase and silence her. Anzaldúa (1987) theorizes the borderlands as psychological, sexual, spiritual spaces that are "physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy […] a place of contradictions" (p. 19). While characterized by a sense of discomfort on one hand, the borderlands are also described

as spaces of joy, artistic creation, and connection. Categories previously viewed as separate blend together and distinctions disappear as Anzaldúa mixes genres, weaving poetry with philosophy with personal narrative in multiple languages and language varieties. Borderlands are on the margins of society, housing "the prohibited and forbidden" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 25). "*Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 25).

In the preface to the first edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa (1987) describes her writing as a way of affirming her existence in this liminal space, shaped by her dual positionalities as Chicana and as a lesbian.

> This book, then, speaks of my existence. My preoccupations with the inner life of the Self, and with the struggle of that Self amidst adversity and violation; with the confluence of primordial images; with the unique positionings consciousness takes at these confluent streams; and with my almost instinctive urge to communicate, to speak, to write about life on the borders, life in the shadows. (p. 19)

It is the linguistic actions of speaking and writing that allow Anzaldúa to understand and connect beyond the confines of her positioning. Later in the book, she describes the embodied connection between language and the self:

> Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity–I am my language. [...] I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue–my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence. (p. 81)

Through the corporeal metaphors of "twin skin" and "serpent's tongue," Anzaldúa describes her voice from the borderlands, with its heterogeneity, multiplicity, and contradictions, as the tool for overcoming the shame and silence that otherwise dominate.

This conceptualization of the borderlands impacts both the analytic focus and methodological approach of the present study, aligning with approaches developed by queer feminist scholars of color. Cruz (2011), in her research alongside queer street youth of color, observes that the "in-between spaces, the liminal, *los intersticios*, the tight spaces of our positionalities" (p. 555) within paradigms and labels can fix us, limiting possibilities for movement and action. She refers to feminist philosopher Maria Lugones:

> And if "you" (always abstracted "you") are one of the dominated, your movements are highly restricted and contained. And there may not be any you there under certain

descriptions, such as "lesbian" or any other description that captures transgression. (Lugones 2003, p. 9, cited by Cruz, 2011, p. 555).

Cruz proposes collaborative methodologies with multiply marginalized participants to "enact a 'faithful witnessing' in solidarity with the communities [researchers] are describing, a movement away from the radical othering that often happens in social science research" (p. 547). This entails aligning oneself with one's research participants, breaking down deficit tropes, and privileging agency both in data collection and analysis (Cruz, 2011). The present study seeks to take up this ethic of "resistance research" through the use of collaborative methodologies and an inductive approach to analysis privileging the participant's own understanding of their experiences. These will be described in the sections to follow.

## Methods

Data for the present analysis is drawn from a collaborative qualitative study (Jourian & Nicolazzo, 2017) conducted between January and June of 2022, which engaged ten non-binary high school learners of Spanish and/or French across the United States in an online community known as the Non-Binary Language Alliance (NBLA) (Spiegelman, forthcoming; see also Moore et al., 2024). To combat isolation and avoid "extractivist" methods that fail to benefit the marginalized community being researched (Radi, 2019), the project connected participants with one another, provided supportive community based around common experiences, offered desired benefits, and centered participants as epistemic authorities and "scholars of their own experience" (Mayo, 2017, p. 533). The approach aligns with trans epistemologies as it aims to "transform society toward liberatory ends" (Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 19) both through its impact on participants and by generating data to be used for advocacy in language education.

Participants were recruited online through 77 organizations serving LGBTQ+ youth in the U.S. 263 respondents between the ages of 13 and 18 completed a survey with demographic information and information about their contexts, answers to Likert-scale and open-ended questions about their experiences learning language at school as a non-binary person. Respondents interested in participating in the NBLA completed an additional informed consent questionnaire, and many of these were contacted via email based on diversity of geography, race/ethnicity, and home language.

The research team consisted of the author, who is a queer, cisgender adult, and a non-binary undergraduate research assistant, both of whom are white, non-Hispanic, and L1 speakers of English. On Zoom, participants engaged in both individual and collective activities that generated the data used in the study. Individually, participants engaged in two semi-structured

interviews (Roulston, 2010) that included arts-based elicitation techniques (Bagnoli, 2009), and many kept a journal about their experiences in language class over the spring semester. Collectively, participants attended a five-hour workshop on gender and language learning run by both researchers which included community-building, focus groups, learning about non-binary innovations in French and Spanish, and project time for art and activism. Many students additionally opted to attend between one and four 90-minute monthly group meetings, engaging in group conversations about shared experiences and collaborating on creative storytelling using non-binary French and Spanish. Following Puckett et al.'s (2018) recommendations for ethical research practices with gender-diverse individuals, participants were compensated up to $70 for their time.

Cherry was selected for the present analysis due to the unique experiences they recounted as a heritage learner who used Spanish both at school and at home. During the project, they participated in several data-generating events, as noted in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Data-generating events

| Data Source | Date | Details |
|---|---|---|
| Survey | 1/10/22 | 33-item online survey |
| Interview #1 | 1/27/22 | 53-minute Zoom video recording |
| NBLA Workshop | 2/27/22 | 5-hour Zoom video recording |
| April NBLA Meeting | 4/10/22 | 90-minute Zoom video recording |
| Interview #2 | 6/27/22 | 49-minute Zoom video recording |

Working first from an automated transcript produced by the Zoom software, I revised the 492 minutes (8.2 hours) of video recordings to more accurately represent the events, including chat participation as a form of interaction. These revised transcripts included indications of intonation, emphasis, truncated speech, and overlap. I then conducted inductive thematic analysis on the transcriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Through multiple readings of the data, I observed Cherry's recurring, often emphatic use of the word "exist" as they described their experiences as a non-binary person both in Spanish class and in their Spanish-speaking community outside of class. This word was particularly salient in Cherry's accounts of the tension over whether gender-neutral language "existed" in Spanish. After identifying these passages and rereading the full data set, I noticed that Cherry's question related not only to linguistic authority and which words are "real," but also to the extent to which they, as a non-binary Latine person, are able to "exist," speak, and be spoken of. The analysis speaks to the following questions: What kind of "existence" is possible for a non-binary HL in the diverse

linguistic, social, and institutional arenas of their life? What factors allow and constrain this student's ability to "exist"?

*The participant*

Cherry was 17 years old at the time of our first interview in January 2021, in the 11th grade at a public high school in the South of the United States. Cherry lives with their parents and siblings close to a city with a large Spanish-speaking community. They identify as non-binary, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, and *Latine,* a gender-neutral alternative to the contested *Latinx*. In terms of sexuality, they know they are "not straight" (Interview 1) and are debating between "bisexual" and "lesbian" as an appropriate label, acknowledging the complexity of using these terms as someone with a non-binary gender identity. They serve as Vice President of their school's Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) and many of their close friends also serve on the board. Cherry grew up speaking both Spanish and English at home. Their father and father's family are from Cuba and their mother is from the Midwestern U.S. and does not speak Spanish. At the time of our interviews, Cherry was enrolled in an AP (Advanced Placement) Spanish class, after having taken Spanish classes at school for the previous two years. They described their teacher as an "older," "traditional" Cuban woman (Interview 2). For Cherry, Spanish is not only a tool for connecting with their Spanish-speaking family and Cuban culture, but "the language IS my culture, you know?" (Interview 1)[1]. Cherry's motivation for studying Spanish is linked to their cultural identity, and feeling less fluent than classmates with solely Spanish-speaking households was a source of linguistic and identity insecurity for Cherry: "I really want to be connected to my culture! I don't want like my culture and my ethnicity, like to be questioned or judged just because, I don't fluently speak Spanish" (Focus Group). Cherry plans to continue studying Spanish in college while also pursuing their interests in art, photography, and film.

Cherry began questioning their gender while quarantined during the COVID-19 pandemic, at which point they told their friends and began experimenting with different pronouns in English.

> I basically was going by *she/they* for a while, um, and it sort of just snowballed from there (laughs) into like *she/they, they/she, they/them*, um, until I became most

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[1] The following transcription conventions are used: "-" indicates truncated speech; "?" indicates rising intonation; "." indicates falling intonation; "," indicates a slight pause; "…" indicates a longer pause; ALL CAPS indicates emphasis.

comfortable with um, *they/them* and… not, like a lack of gender, but more of just um… I don't really… care? […] it's more just, existing, I guess you could say. (Interview 1)

I asked Cherry how it felt for people to use *she* or *they* pronouns to refer to them, and Cherry responded:

When people use *she/her* pronouns it just doesn't feel like me. Like it feels like, they're talking to someone else, but the conversation is directed at me, it's really… it's j- it's just uncomfortable. But when people use *they/them* it's like it just feels comfortable. It feels like, um… pronouns that I'm like, at home with, it feels like what I SHOULD be referred to as. So yeah it's definitely, um makes me happier to be referred to as *they/them*. (Interview 1)

When I asked Cherry how it felt to be referred to using different pronouns in Spanish, they expressed a difference with English based on the options that they saw as available:

Hearing *ella* it's a little different than hearing *she*? It's not that I identify with it more it just… Sometimes it feels like *elle* just doesn't EXIST, upsettingly. Like I wish it did. Um, so yeah it's not that I'm MORE comfortable being called *ella*? It's more, that that's just what I hear, you know? (Interview 1)

Salient in these excerpts are multiple points about Cherry's relationship to language and gender identity. First, for Cherry, non-binary means experiencing a sense of gender "apathy" (April meeting): not being a particular category, but "just, existing." Second, Cherry views pronouns pragmatically, as terms that they can try on and adjust until they fit and feel "comfortable." The language they use to refer to themself describes but does not constitute their identity, and it can be subject to change without changing who Cherry is. Third, there is variation in how Cherry is referred to in their life by different people and in different settings: while Cherry expresses a preference for non-binary pronouns in English and Spanish, which is affirmed by friends, they are frequently misgendered as feminine in both English and Spanish by family, school adults, and peers they know less well. Cherry describes this misgendering as "uncomfortable" as it provokes a sense of dissociation: "it feels like, they're talking to someone else." Finally, Cherry describes a difference in the way they experience being gendered in English and in Spanish based on the options that are perceived as available in each language: "sometimes it feels like *elle* just doesn't EXIST."

This question of linguistic existence will be explored through the analysis of key excerpts from Cherry's participation in the NBLA project.

**Analysis**

I identified five themes in Cherry's accounts of linguistic existence in Spanish: 1) the limited existence possible for them in Spanish class, 2) encountering attitudes that negate the existence of non-binary language and identities, 3) lack of legitimacy while existing as a Latine person without perfect fluency in Spanish, 4) gaining the vocabulary to exist in Spanish, and 5) establishing linguistic existence through peer affirmation. I will explore each of these in turn.

*"I'm there in the middle, just existing": Isolation & silence in Spanish class*

In each interview, I asked Cherry to imagine themself in Spanish class and to draw a picture of themself, including what they were doing, how they felt, and who or what was around them. In the first interview, they drew the following:

**Figure 1**. Cherry's Self Portrait
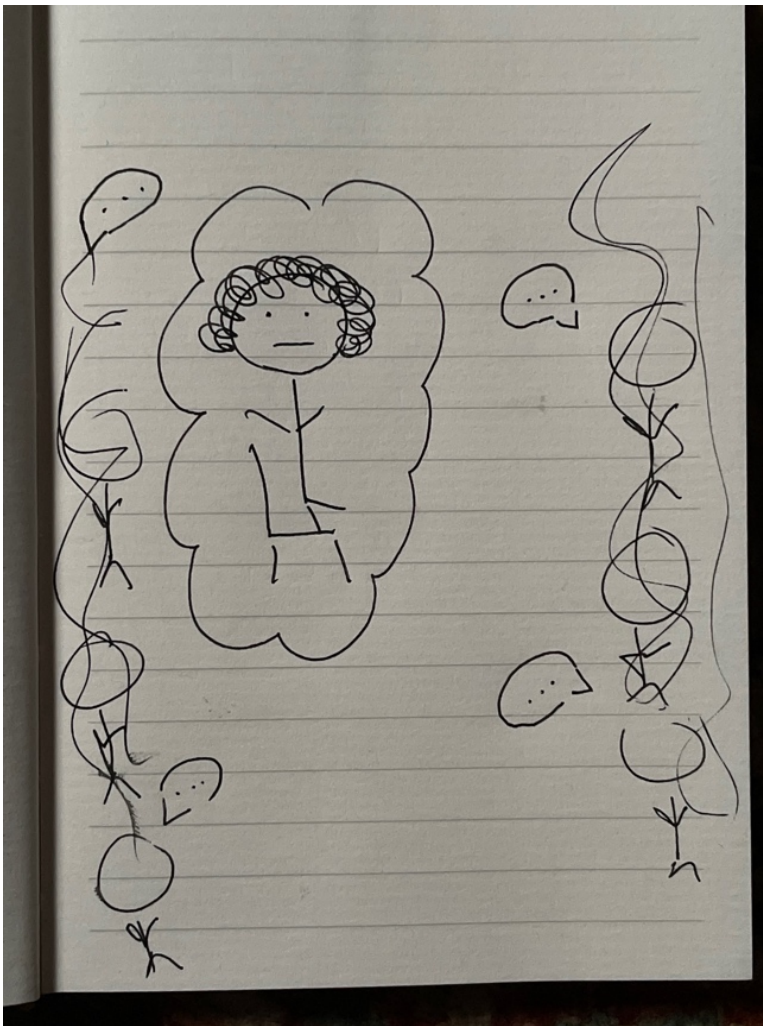
Cherry explained their drawing as encapsulating a sense of isolation and silence:

> I usually feel really isolated in that class, just, everyone's talking and having these like super intellectual conversations and I'm just, just there. Like that, so I have all the people on the side like talking, the little lines are like- conversation and noise, and I'm there in the middle just, existing. (Interview 1)

The lines in the self-portrait represent conversations among their classmates and teacher. Cherry observed that part of their sense of isolation is because, due to a lack of recognition or use of gender-neutral language in the class, Cherry is not referred to in a way that connects with who they are:

> I don't really get a line that reaches me [.…] [The teacher is] connecting to the other students and referring to them correctly, but the way she refers to me still doesn't quite connect as much as I would like it to? Which is why I didn't have a line that like went- to me from her little speech bubble. (Interview 2)

In addition to feeling disconnected from others due to the way they are referred to, Cherry describes feeling unable to initiate connection with others. This discomfort and difficulty expressing themself is linked with their feelings of linguistic insecurity, their positionality as a student, and the perceived risk of talking to their teacher:

> My face on the little characters is like… kind of just straight face, like- 'cause I don't really feel like I have a way to, express my discomfort? Since I don't feel comfortable talking to my teacher? Um… I just am- there, you know what I mean? Like I just- I would go to the class and sit there and exist in it and try my best to pass like the AP (laugh) and then I'd leave, I didn't really feel like I had a deep connection… because, I couldn't… I- I could BE myself? But I couldn't… I didn't a- feel like other people saw me the way I wanted to be seen. (Interview 2)

In this excerpt, Cherry clarifies that others' perceptions of them do not define who they are. However, the mismatch between how they are perceived and who they know themself to be makes authentic connection impossible: they are able to "exist" in the space, but not to speak or be spoken to or about in any meaningful way. The kind of "existence" that Cherry describes as possible in Spanish class is minimized and passive, physical only, an insufficiency repeatedly emphasized by the adverb "just": "just existing," "I just am there," "just […] sit there and exist in it." The lack of linguistic or social existence in this setting is related to two aspects particular to the classroom setting: negative attitudes toward non-binary Spanish, and Cherry's positionality as a self-perceived non-fluent Latine and imperfect student. These two themes will be explored next.

*"They think those identities shouldn't exist": Negative attitudes from Spanish-speaking community*

Despite feeling secure in their own identity as both non-binary and Latine, Cherry struggled with negative attitudes in Spanish-speaking communities, both in and out of school, towards the language they use to describe themself. In many cases, these encounters involved teachers, other adults, and occasional peers voicing disdain or ridicule towards non-binary Spanish. When asked on the survey if they had had any memorable experiences with gender in Spanish class, Cherry wrote:

> one time a Spanish teacher was talking to the class about people from Latin countries, and he said something along the lines of "Latina and Latino people, or the ~latine~" but he said latine with a sneer as if he was making fun of it. It felt really invalidating. (Survey)

This sense of identity invalidation was prompted not only by explicit comments but also implicitly, by the erasure of non-binary forms in the classroom. Cherry recounted that through all of their Spanish education at school, it was always "*el* or *la*, or *ella* or *ello* [sic]." This absence of non-binary linguistic representation prompted frustration and confusion for Cherry, who knew that non-binary pronouns did exist in Spanish, but felt that speaking up about it would be socially risky:

> It was, I guess, like confusing. I was always like, like I KNEW that the pronouns existed but like, why weren't they THERE? but I never- I wouldn't… I wouldn't SAY anything about it? Because… um like for fear of once again, like getting called out on it or getting made fun of for saying something like that. (Interview 1)

They acknowledged that younger Spanish-speakers "are usually all right with" gender-neutral Spanish, including their friends who are largely LGBTQ+.

In Cherry's experience, negative attitudes towards non-binary language in Spanish extend to censure of non-binary identities themselves, suggesting not only that non-binary identities *don't* exist, but that they *shouldn't*:

> There's a large portion of [Hispanic adults] who just, don't take gender neutrality seriously, um, […] they just don't understand, they don't really feel like it exists, or they feel like it's a joke? […] which makes it feel like those identities just aren't… it makes it feel like THEY think, those identities shouldn't exist um, so yeah. (Interview 1)

Cherry reflected on the emotional impact of these attitudes: "it can be a little… scary to know that there are people who seriously think that, like the language that, um, defines like who I am, just shouldn't exist. It can be a little upsetting" (Interview 1).

*"How can you be Cuban if you don't speak Spanish as well as like most people do?": Linguistic insecurity*

As a proud Cuban, Cherry feels frustration with their proficiency level in Spanish, based on the idea that claiming a legitimate Latine identity requires perfect fluency. "Like I've been told, like, how can you be- how can you be Cuban if you don't- speak Spanish as well as, like most people do, and stuff like that, and it's very frustrating" (Focus Group). This feeling of linguistic insecurity, being positioned as "less fluent" or feeling that the legitimacy of their Cuban identity is in question, holds Cherry back from advocating for or educating others about non-binary Spanish. Their perceived lack of fluency impacts Cherry's interactions with classmates, their teacher, and older family members. When considering the possibility of advocating for gender-neutral language in Spanish class, Cherry felt that their "more fluent" peers would delegitimize their suggestion:

> I feel, like everyone around me is more fluent than I am? […] So I feel like inferior, if I were to bring up something like what about these pronouns they'd be like, what are you talking about? Um, I know Spanish better than you. (Focus Group)

As Cherry struggled to keep up with their schoolwork during the spring semester, they felt that they lacked the right to make suggestions to their teacher about LGBTQ+ inclusion and non-binary language: "now that I'm like behind in her class, it makes me feel really awkward going up to her to like suggest things and stuff like that. When I have like, Ds in the gradebook" (April Meeting). In Cherry's view, the power difference between student and teacher makes it difficult to initiate interactions from a student position. Only a perfect student would have the authority to make suggestions about the language within the classroom context. This aspect of Cherry's experience reflects Tegan's fear of approaching their teacher to ask about gender-neutral language (Moore et al., 2024) and suggests that the teacher-student power dynamic may make linguistic advocacy challenging for L2 learners and HL alike.

Cherry voiced a similar roadblock in talking to their Spanish-speaking family members about gender-neutral language. While they would like to be referred to with *elle* pronouns more regularly, they view many obstacles to this, including their family's limited understanding of LGBTQ+ identities. Cherry imagined talking to their grandparents and explaining *elle* pronouns

to them, and while the idea of coming out to their grandparents felt scary, this fear was exacerbated by their perceived lack of perfect fluency in Spanish:

> Especially because my Spanish isn't as good as I would want it to be? I feel like I wouldn't be able to properly explain to them how I felt about the situation, and the correct pronouns and stuff like that. Maybe if I ever get to a point where I'm like… completely, like a thousand percent fluent in Spanish, and also, like a professional at using (laughs) the non-binary language, then I could- like in Spanish, then I could try? (Interview 2)

For Cherry, advocating for the use of non-binary Spanish would require an impossible ("thousand percent") level of fluency and being a "professional" at the language. They feel that this level of authority is not accessible to them as an "imperfect" speaker of Spanish.

*"There's like a whole vocabulary that I didn't know about!": Learning to be queer in Spanish*

While Spanish class offered limited potential for authentic connection and existence for Cherry, they were able to find affirmation through queer community spaces. During the NBLA workshop, I provided students with a document called A Student's Guide to Non-Binary Spanish ([http://www.tinyurl.com/NBLASpanish](http://www.tinyurl.com/NBLASpanish)). In addition to grammatical strategies for the expression of non-binary gender identities in Spanish and a list of resources, the document included a two-page lexicon of LGBTQ+ vocabulary in Spanish and English. Cherry expressed wonder at seeing so many terms to describe gender and sexuality, and it made them realize that they had not known that these words existed in Spanish. Reflecting aloud with other students, Cherry's usually joyful demeanor transformed quickly into frustration and anger:

> (laughs) There's so much and it's just so um… like the vocabulary it's so frustrating, like it makes me angry! That um... like none of this is ever brought up in school. […] For my Spanish class specifically we learn about all these different like topics, and like talking about like, culture and family, and, like, art, and technology, like I don't know like in Spanish, and, like gender and sexuality are NEVER brought up! Even when you're talking about stuff like family and stuff like- like- you hear about anything related to that and then um, in- not in Spanish classes. […] I've never been in a situation, where I've been able to learn about these things or, like use proper pronouns in Spanish class, and so yeah, it's just CRAZY that there's like a whole, vocabulary that I didn't know about! (February Workshop)

Cherry's repetitive use of negative structures ("none of this… ever," "never brought up," "I've never been in a situation," "I didn't know about") and adverbs implying extremity ("ever," "even") emphasizes their indignation at this omission. Cherry realized that the lack of LGBTQ+

representation in their Spanish classroom and community had made them believe that words for these identities did not even exist, as they had never seen or heard them. The realization that it is possible to be articulated as queer in Spanish came with the painful recognition that this had been denied to them. Gaining knowledge of how to express queer identities in Spanish was a step towards affirming the legitimacy of their existence in the language and community spaces. Cherry's group of queer and allied school friends provided an additional source of identity affirmation in Spanish.

### *"This is something that exists!": Building queer communities of practice*

While Cherry's classroom and family environments were less than open to the recognition of their non-binary identity in Spanish, Cherry found linguistic and social affirmation through their school friends. All of the members of Cherry's core friend group are GSA members, and two thirds of the group speaks Spanish in addition to English. Cherry's friends are the only people in their life who consistently use gender-neutral language for Cherry in Spanish. Cherry contrasts being referred to by their peers in a gender-neutral manner with the binary constraints imposed by the language ideologies in their Spanish classroom. When I asked Cherry what it felt like for their friends to use *elle* and *-e* endings to refer to them, they said:

> It feels like, almost a little surprising? But in a good way, like surprising like, "wow! this like is something (laughs) that exists!" Um, it should be used more often, but yeah. It's a nice feeling for sure, when I'm referred to correctly because I'll be in Spanish class, and it just feels like a world limited to *ella* and *ello* [sic], like there's no… gender non-conforming way refer to people- or there IS, but like that's what it FEELS like in class and stuff like that. so yeah it's really- comfortable. (Interview 1)

Even when speaking about real experiences of linguistic affirmation in Spanish, Cherry doubts, second-guesses, and corrects themself about whether these forms even "exist": "there's no… gender non-conforming way to refer to people- or there IS," which shows the reach and power of authoritative exclusionary attitudes towards gender-neutral language, particularly in the classroom. Regardless, Cherry describes having their non-binary existence affirmed in Spanish as "good," "nice," "comfortable," and "correct."

Evident throughout Cherry's accounts of being gendered correctly in Spanish is a sense of conflict: between claiming their rightful existence in Spanish and a sense of an incongruity between their language and identity. Reflecting on the semester, they described the positive feeling of being gendered correctly in Spanish as follows: "I don't know, like, it's kind of like a gender euphoria, but in Spanish (laughs) which is funny to say" (Interview 2). *Gender euphoria*, a concept developed within transgender communities to balance the negative

emphasis on *gender dysphoria*, designates a feeling of "comfort, confidence, certainty, satisfaction, and joy in response to affirmation of one's body or one's gender identity" (Austin et al., 2022, p. 1408). In Cherry's account, the power of experiencing gender euphoria is hedged through a mitigated comparison ("like, it's kind of like"). Cherry's use of the conjunction "but" is telling of the contradiction they perceive between the Spanish language and experiences of gender affirmation. This sense of tension is additionally underscored by the metacommentary "which is funny to say," as if gender euphoria is illogical or unlikely to be found in Spanish. Regardless of the apparent contradiction, linguistic affirmation within their own community of queer Latine peers is a powerful force towards Cherry's feeling of legitimate existence and connection through Spanish.

**Discussion**

The analysis brings to light several important points about the factors in and impacts of Cherry's ability to "exist" in the borderlands of non-binary gender and the Spanish language. First, Cherry's reflections indicate that the question of what linguistic forms *exist* as available and legitimate in Spanish is determined not only globally, by language academies and dictionaries, but also locally: through the attitudes and ideologies conveyed through particular institutional, social, and linguistic contexts. In Cherry's case, these attitudes allow for different possibilities, from the affirmation of their queer Latine friends embracing gender-neutral language to the explicit negative messaging and erasure of gender-neutrality in the Spanish classroom. These two Spanish-speaking environments and possibilities provoked opposite emotional experiences for Cherry: exclusionary classroom attitudes led to silent discomfort and isolation, while linguistic affirmation from peers provided connection, comfort, and even euphoria. The contrasting language attitudes operating in these spaces are quite impactful, as they enable or limit Cherry's participation in Spanish-speaking community, affecting their ability to practice and progress in Spanish as well as their sense of belonging in Latine community.

In addition to language attitudes, structures of power and authority, which reside in multiple dimensions of Cherry's environment and consciousness, strongly impact possibilities for linguistic existence. These operate through ideological macrostructures as well as in local positionings. Cisheteronormativity, manifesting in queer curricular erasure, establishes itself through powerful unmarked norms in classroom spaces yet may pass unnoticed (Moore, et al., 2024). Cherry's sudden realization that words to describe queer identities exist in Spanish testifies to a particular form of educational gaslighting resulting from this erasure. Social identities and roles also carry power and authority in determining who can claim linguistic existence. Based on their positionality, Cherry views themself as lacking the legitimacy to act

upon the Spanish language in both classroom and family settings. This includes their role as a student (vs. teacher), as a young person (vs. elder), as an imperfect student (vs. perfect), and as a self-perceived less-proficient Spanish speaker (vs. fluent). Additionally, authoritative views on what language does and does not exist, whether from the community at large or in Spanish class specifically, are hugely impactful even on a subconscious level. As evidenced in the excerpts analyzed, even Cherry, who has thought a great deal about gender-neutral language and identity within supportive community, constantly forgets and must remind themself that the pronouns they use in Spanish even "exist."

Finally, Cherry's experiences illuminate the inextricable and hugely impactful connection between language and identity for trans and non-binary HLs. The "debate" over gender-neutral Spanish is not only about language, but both explicitly and implicitly implicates Cherry's right to exist as a non-binary person. It impacts their ability to be spoken to and about in a way that connects with who they are, to feel seen and build community with family, peers, and school adults, to comfortably speak and progress in Spanish at school, and to participate meaningfully in Latine community. Cherry's insecurity in their Spanish proficiency, and consequently in the perceived legitimacy of their Cuban identity, align with Ali's (2021) observation of "linguistic deficit" connecting with a sense of "identity deficit" for HLs. As a non-binary person, Cherry's felt identity deficit carries additional consequences, such as a lack of authority to propose non-traditional forms, to advocate within the language, or to ask to be referred to in ways that align with their identity. This results in continued misgendering, discomfort, a sense of disempowerment, and a dual identity invalidation, of their identity both as non-binary and as Latine.

## Conclusion

Cherry's story sheds light on the experiences of one non-binary HL of Spanish. Located at the borderlands of binary native speaker paradigms and binary gender categories, Cherry speaks out to assert their right to exist as a non-binary Cuban-American. While constrained by conservative language ideologies and by their less powerful positioning within the Spanish classroom setting, Cherry builds community with queer and allied Latine peers who offer affirmation through gender-neutral language. In doing so, Cherry and their friends collectively assert their right to exist and to define their own Spanish, contributing towards linguistic evolution and innovation even when silenced in classroom and family contexts.

This study offers important implications for researchers. Studies on trans and non-binary students' experiences in K-12 schools tends to be broad-scale and quantitative (e.g., Allen et al., 2020; Kosciw et al., 2020; The Trevor Project, 2020), effectively demonstrating widespread

failures of policy, recurrent experiences such as misgendering, and broad trends related to mental health, yet necessarily glossing over nuances within and among minority groups. There is a need for more qualitative research that is sensitive to intersectional identity, the impact of context, and individuals' agency. Indeed, listening to trans and non-binary Spanish speakers is crucial for challenging the false binary that frames gender-neutral Spanish in the classroom as an abstract political debate imposed by white/Anglo hegemony, and to assert the legitimacy and existence of the users of these evolving linguistic forms. More broadly, researchers must move beyond binary paradigms such as native/non-native speaker, male/female, masculine/feminine, transgender/cisgender, Spanish/English, and Latine/Anglo-American to gain insight into the situated experiences and practices of individuals whose lives and identities are simply not legible through these frameworks. Research into language and identity must treat borderlands and hybridity as a norm, not an anomaly, ask whose voices are not being heard, and seek to illuminate minority experiences through methodologies that center the ways in which individuals define and position themselves. Research into these tight identity spaces is essential for understanding the impact of language ideologies and policies on individuals.

Several key implications for language teachers also emerge from Cherry's accounts. First, all students need to be able to exist in language, and know their existence to be legitimate, in order to participate and learn. This means teaching non-binary pronouns and forms of agreement, as well as vocabulary to describe gender and sexuality. Indeed, for non-binary Latine students, the inclusion or exclusion of a simple pronoun in the classroom can make the difference between a purely physical level of existence, such as Cherry's self-portrait in the bubble, and an ability to communicate, advocate, connect, progress, and even experience gender euphoria. Curricular inclusion of queer, trans, and non-binary individuals within the target culture, whether current or historical, is essential for showing students that these identities exist and that students are not alone. An intersectional lens is crucial in this representation, lest the default categories of whiteness and cis-ness remain unchallenged.

Second, teachers need to be aware that language attitudes and ideologies regarding what or who is "native," "correct," "normal," or "real" communicate messages to students that implicate their identities, often negatively, based on factors such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, language variety, and national origin. Teachers must actively reflect on their own biases and challenge harmful judgments when they are voiced by students or reflected in course materials. Critical pedagogies (Leeman, 2005; Norton & Toohey, 2004) as well as Trans-Affirming Queer Inquiry-Based Pedagogies (Knisely & Paiz, 2021) provide useful guidance towards making visible and problematizing power dynamics as they relate to the intersection of language and identity.

In order for students to critically understand the ways in which language not only reflects social relations, but also constitutes them, the discussion of the language-power nexus needs to be explicit not only in addressing the social and political reasons why certain language varieties and practices have been systematically subordinated, but also in examining how such subordination has been carried out. (Leeman, 2005, p. 41)

In this way, teachers can empower students to view themselves as active and legitimate participants in and co-creators of the target or heritage language, regardless of their proficiency levels, grades, family background, sexuality, and gender. Futhermore, students can understand the function of the hierarchies that marginalize members of different identity-based groups and choose to contest them. Whether non-binary or HL or both or neither, all have a right to exist, to speak, and to be spoken to in a way that reflects who they are.

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