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The Gag City Grammar Police: Language and Algorithmic Community on Stan Twitter

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ABSTRACT

While there is a wealth of sociolinguistic research on subculture and a rapidly growing field of digital ethnography, little research has been conducted on subcultural language use online. Superfan groups, or stans, form speech communities on Twitter/X and present as a closed group despite remaining public. Through digital ethnographic observation of nonstandard English use on Twitter, I argue that Barbz, or Nicki Minaj stans, discourage their posts from spreading to the general public. Working with the algorithm's composition of social media feeds, Barbz use language to conceal themselves while remaining discoverable. Individuals use language variation and encoding to interact directly with the algorithm, strategically hiding their conversations from the public. By way of sociolinguistic theories including variance and enregisterment, I situate this study in relation to fandom studies, cultural capital, and structural theories of internet. This netnography takes a multimodal approach to social media, showing that Barbz strategically open their community at specific times and in specific ways that are advantageous to them. On Twitter, Barbz employ language to manipulate the borders of both their community and their audience. In order to understand group maintenance, formation, and relationality online it is vital to account for the role of the algorithm as companion rather than structural affordance.

Keywords: fandom, algorithms, memes, social media, sociolinguistics

"What's Wig?"

A flushed young man is about to audition before three famous singers with the power to give him stardom (American Idol 2018). After introducing himself, he mutters, "Wig, okay." Katy Perry, one of the judges, responds, "Wig- did you just say wig? I know, wig, I feel that already." Her fellow judges look around the room, confused. "Wig? What's wig?" they ask. Katy cuts them off. "It's not your language; it's just for us." *Wig* comes from African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a cropped form of 'wig flew' or 'wig snatched,' expressions of shock, excitement, or praise (Know Your Meme 2018). The term is commonly used in fandom communities on stan Twitter. This viral interaction demonstrates the power of language to define a group by limiting the intelligibility of their communication. Despite being a nationally televised interaction, these two were able to have a private conversation.

'Stan' is used within fandom circles as a descriptive category. Some say it is a portmanteau of 'stalker' and 'fan,' while others argue it was adopted from Eminem's eponymous single from 2000, which tells the story of an obsessed fan named Stan whose desire to connect with Eminem drives him to violence (Crow 2019). The word 'stan' was defined as both noun and verb to describe obsessive devotion in 2008 (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a). In exploring stan Twitter, I ask, what is the role of language in online stan communities? More specifically, I seek to describe the practice that lies at this intersection of social media, fandom, and language, drawing on discourse analysis to interrogate the communication that takes place beyond human-to-human semantics.

Academic depictions of fandom tend to characterize fans as obsessive, although many self-identify as fans while remaining decidedly casual (Sandvoss 2003). Such casual fans still form community — Sandvoss (2003) highlights the European football fan — without the fanatical tendencies of popular culture stans. The multiplicity of fan practices leads some researchers to differentiate "fan" from "fandom" (Jenkins 2006; Abd-Rahim 2019). However, this distinction falsely implies that community does not form among casual fans. 'Fandom' also describes a community without specifying their investment. Crow (2019, 8) typologized 'stans' as individuals with a social investment in a person or group "to the point of obsession," resolving both of the above tensions. I distinguish stans to resist conflating generic casual fans with stans; both fans and stans use language to define themselves and their roles in a community and to perform authenticity (Crow 2019; Malik and Haidar 2023). Researchers who have examined these internal structures of fan communities have paid scant attention to how the fan community interacts with the rest of the social network site (SNS).

Through this digital linguistic ethnography of a single stan group, I argue that language like 'wig' proliferates on Twitter due to its reliance on the algorithm to assemble customized feeds through establishing perceived interests and social networks. By turning my gaze toward the algorithm, I highlight a layer of social mediation necessary for understanding the sociolinguistic landscape that facilitates interactions like American Idol's viral *wig* moment. Understanding this dimension of digital life is vital to ensuring positive future relations with technology.

A 'LIT' REVIEW

Sociolinguistics is concerned with speech content alongside the context in which language is used. In 'speech communities,' whose speech acts are unique roughly according to the limits of their social group, speech acts are contextually dynamic, leading to inconsistent norms between groups (Gumperz 1968). Over time, this organic diversity becomes codified, leading to identifiable linguistic variance between groups. These changes in the use of language allow for

enregisterment, the strategic use of specific speech patterns to signal physical or social characteristics for a contextual advantage (Agha 2003). Agha's (2003) work aligns with Penelope Eckert's (2012) three waves of sociolinguistic variation studies: The first wave intended to identify variation, while second wave ethnographic studies examined variation as indexical of social identity. These paradigms are giving way to the third wave, which focuses on how individuals navigate social landscapes using language variance. In this paper, my focus is on nonstandard language variation, so I have chosen to use the term African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to mean broad nonstandard language used by Black Americans (Winford 2015). However, in this distinction, I recognize that the term itself is under question: Sharese King (2020) notes that 'AAVE' inaccurately defines the group of speakers, their relationship to English, and the classed status of the speech.

Observing enregisterment of AAVE by gay men on Twitter, Ilbury (2020) observes that AAVE is often adopted to present a 'Sassy Queen' persona. Such strategic performances take advantage of pre-existing essentialized traits associated with Black American speech communities (which diverge from the Standard English commonly found in formalized education and writing) by implicating them into the speaker's contingent identity and altering the speaker's social position. Characterological enregisterment embodies the capability of language to construct a dynamic and adaptable identity, but a broader political analysis may find this strategy a form of digital blackface (Ilbury 2020, 261 n6). Indeed, the register of speech of interest in this project, sometimes known as 'stan Twitter speak' or 'internet slang,' has its roots in AAVE and language used by Black and Latin gay men and trans women in the underground ballroom scene of the '80s (Chery 2022; Davis 2021). It is not possible or productive to define this 'internet slang' as a de-racialized conglomeration of AAVE and ballroom language. Rather, it is the social landscape itself that gives rise to these variations on Twitter, and the social landscape that is the focus of this study.

Linguistic self-definition of groups often takes place through code-switching, the insertion of one linguistic system into another. Observations of an Italian-American cultural group where Italian code-switching was common showed that the intelligibility of language when speaking to a general audience is often known and considered (De Fina 2007). This principle has also been shown to intentionally exclude individuals or declare authenticity. One study of cannabis users in New York City found that code-switching with slang was instrumental in protecting information from outsider encroachment, offering authenticity and identity separate from other similar communities (Johnson et al. 2006). These studies all demonstrate that subculture-specific language is particularly vital to the self-definition of social groups such as stans.

Rampton's (2005) landmark study on the cross-cultural codeswitching of British youth presents these practices as polyphonic sites of co-creation, acts of solidarity rather than absorption or appropriation into the dominant culture. In a sense, this rings true, as I observed individuals comfortably presenting as white while enmeshing themselves in the linguistic and cultural landscape of Barb Twitter. But, even in this distinction, Barbz still fiercely policed the linguistic boundary of their community. As @SleezeMaraj says in an indirect tweet, "I really want them to stop stealing our lingo…" They clarify their specific issue over words like "gag," "catch it," and "lashings" through replies. However, @SleezeMaraj is making these comments not in a racial context, but rather in the context of inter-stan conflicts. It seems that the linguistic practices I describe here are not an ethnolect because they are not policed along the lines of race.

This is not open season, but rather a strategic and semi-permeable opening directed toward solidarity and cooperation in fan practices rather than racial or hierarchical dynamics as Rampton (2005) described. The common ground of stanhood allows for language crossing to be a polyphonic discourse that preserves the original voice of the language, forestalling de-racialization or digital blackface. Barbz' policing of language seems to extend beyond a concern for culture wars and grows directly from the foundation and stability of their community, cautious that their words

are not highjacked by outsiders with opposing goals.

Stans: The Apes of Genius?

Some of the first fandom studies arose as a response to Bourdieu's (1984) portrayal of mass or popular culture as less refined or complex than high culture. In Distinction, where he uncovered the vertical movement within and between classes, Bourdieu called the middle class "apes of genius," imitating the achievements of bourgeois cultural insiders (Kant, qtd. in Bourdieu 1984, 326). Fiske (1992) argues that this delineation is reductive and portrays the middle class as repressed and dominated, lacking desire and creativity. From this perspective, fandom studies work toward the redistribution of cultural agency among the masses.

For example, perceived cultural outsiders wearing a classic band t-shirt, like Nirvana, are often asked by insiders to name five songs to assess their fandom, because a 'fake fan' might use economic capital for access to the band's fandom without cultural experience to back it up. This experience is also often gendered, as men assume that young women buy band tees from chain retail stores because they want to seem cultured, not because they are authentic fans. By melding middle-class habitus with the high-class field, such a "heterodoxy experienced as if it were orthodoxy" only serves to betray the petit bourgeoisie's marked otherness (Bourdieu 1984, 323). Yet, grasping after cultural capital is not a completely pointless endeavour. Many fans influence culture in a big way from their supposedly subordinate positions.

Memes are one way that fans pick up content as their own, independently from high-brow culture's impositions. A meme is something that is not only popular, but replicable, "remade and recombined" according to a textual or visual format (McCulloch 2019, 240). Again, we see that in the necessarily imperfect replication of memes, variations are stabilized and incorporated into the speech community. This mutation produces a dense cultural network dividing the 'memers' from the 'normies' (McCulloch 2019). The in-group's

separation from the masses is prized and prioritized as a marker of status, while outsiders are excluded (Bourdieu 1984). For example, Peeters et al. (2021) attribute the subcultural linguistic variation on 4chan (a forum site where users are anonymous and unidentifiable) to this self-definition through the rejection of others. In the online sphere, memes can be interpreted as an encoded communication of belonging, a repatriation of cultural agency and capital.

Fandoms have become increasingly extreme in their consumption and production on SNS as digital life has complexified. Fans on Weibo developed specific norms of speech in order to take advantage of algorithmic preferences and push certain topics to the Trending page (Yin and Xie 2021). Crucially, this demonstrates that a certain type of fan can be identified solely by the way they speak, and that speech has the power to concretely impact the online social landscape. In this alteration, Weibo fans are creating an exclusionary, classed dynamic. Similarly, the Barbz' employment of linguistic strategies such as memes, AAVE, and ballroom language is a linguistic exercise of cultural capital. In closing their community, Barbz unite language, culture, and power.

Dawn of the Planet of the Stans

Stans have fluid roles and a wide range of practices. For the purposes of this study, I understand a stan as 'a fan whose love for their idol is so intense that they do not want to be casual and seek closed communities of like-minded devotees.' In a sense, stanhood is more about being in the community of stans than any one specific practice. So, while some may self-identify as fans, not stans, I choose to include them in my stan analysis because of their entanglement in the stan community and their clear removal from casual fandom. Fandom and stanhood overlap; there is no way to confirm the nature of an individual's relationship to their fan-object without asking them, and this is not always practical on SNS (Duffett 2013). However, many stan accounts are explicit about their fandom, with their profile signalling the fan-object as eclipsing or equal to their personal identity.

Take, for example, one Nicki Minaj stan account, @ONIKASTHONG. They were described by another user as "head barb," but their bio describes them as a "fan account." Their profile is full of signals to Nicki Minaj: the profile and header photos are her face, their username is her legal name, Onika, and their bio link leads to a Nicki Minaj website. However, @ONIKASTHONG identifies as a fan and uses, presumably, their own first name, Tyler, as an identifier rather than another sign of the idol. They have not socially dissolved themselves into Nicki Minaj, and yet their identity is fused with her. Given that @ONIKASTHONG has combined their own identity with their love for Nicki Minaj, I place them within my definition of stanhood rather than general fandom. They do not present their Barb life as separate from their personal life in any meaningful way.

The nature of the online space itself fosters the separation of stan groups. danah boyd sees SNS as characterized by affordances, which describe the capacity of structure to reshape publics through impositions and opportunities for users, while also spurring new practices to circumvent them (boyd 2011). Because many platforms do not afford their users the ability to manage their audience as they might in person, the user must collapse many different contexts they encounter in their network into one single profile and feed (Marwick and boyd 2011). If anyone can see your posts, you must prepare yourself for any scenario. A user calling Taylor Swift an eco-terrorist or a capitalistic white-feminist cannot speak exclusively to those critical of Taylor Swift; they must contend with the fact that their critical content could be encountered by any number of fellow users with or opposing perspectives. And hell hath no fury like a Swiftie scorned!

In response to affordances of publicity, some underground groups form 'refracted publics.' These groups intentionally use affordances to "enhance, deflect, or defer" the public's gaze (Abidin 2021, 3). Here, searchability becomes discoverability; information is "unknowable until chanced upon," and communities are buffered from outside perception or understanding (Abidin 2021, 4). In these scenarios, collapsed context does not pose a challenge; it is used as "weaponized context" where information is moved and meaning

perverted with ease (Abidin 2021, 3). For instance, mother is no longer a familial identifier, but rather becomes a way to describe respect and admiration beyond blood ties (Davis 2021). A study of online subculture on 4chan found that volatile and unstable language similarly became weaponized, leveraged to form exclusive in-group dynamics (Peeters et al. 2021). Refracted publics are only enhanced by the introduction of algorithmically curated feeds. By becoming discoverable and weaponizing context, refracted publics like the Barbz edit their audience without becoming unilaterally closed.

Ready Player One: Making Kin with the Algorithm

Given their differences in field from other traditional social sciences, media studies and digital ethnography often necessarily diverge from traditional methodologies. One Sociology Master's thesis (Boucher 2022) describes a unique form of participant observation, with the creation and use of false profiles with pre-existing interests to see the algorithm's influence. Boucher (2022) argues that this algorithm curation allows him to gain insight into the experience of being on an algorithm-driven SNS. Online data is necessarily participatory, not objectively observable (Blommaert and Dong 2020). Without sampling data from a static field, such as replies to a post (Malik and Haidar 2023; Marwick and boyd 2011a), or an individual account (Chun 2017; Ilbury 2020), or through scraping large swaths of data from the code that lies behind the user interface (Kang et al. 2022), Boucher (2022) accessed information fed to him by an algorithm that knew his interests, not just his search terms. This information is inaccessible to the other methods described above in part due to discoverability (Abidin 2021). This algorithm-centred ethnographic observation highlights the growing ineffectiveness of traditional online research methods, which rely on searchability to retrieve data from underground communities. So, I entered into a collaboration with the algorithm to collect data.

The algorithm is not an impartial party; it enacts a vested interest in circulating and producing specific information and thus cannot

be treated as a non-actor (Maly 2022). In practice, algorithms are rarely independent actors but are overseen by human checks and balances, enmeshing them in a network of relations (Seaver 2018). Because Twitter feeds are assembled from posts that are datafied by the algorithm, everything a user sees is informed by the algorithm. Indeed, algorithmic anthropology is devoted to uncovering the complicated relationships between people and the algorithms they collaborate with as actors (Seaver 2018). Given the changeability and individuality of the algorithmic experience, my data are a result of my own position and interactions in the sociotechnical climate of my observation and should be taken as contextual, not universal.

To enter into a relationship is to prove both parties changed, especially in significant difference. Donna Haraway's (2016) influential "A Cyborg Manifesto" investigated challenges that technologically inflected life poses to the strict divisions of the modern world. Haraway (2016) claims that communication and information technologies are tools for recrafting our bodies, and that we who live in concert with technology, even in its legacy, are ourselves cyborgs, intricately bound up with technology in life itself. Later, she proposed the model of the companion species, whose very difference, rather than similarity, is mutually constitutive of each other, "'the relation' is the smallest possible unit of analysis," not the individual (Haraway 2016, 111). We cannot think of ourselves in isolation from the entities with whom we are enmeshed.

If cyborgs are companion species (Haraway 2016, 113), then through each iteration of the algorithm we are fundamentally changed ourselves. We do not make ourselves or our worlds alone; many Indigenous peoples have known this since time immemorial (Todd 2016; TallBear 2011). Perceiving the algorithm as kin is a turn toward the many Indigenous models of worlding that have existed for millennia, not a new paradigm of Western knowledge (Lewis et al. 2018). Embracing this paradigm of kinship is vital to the faithful analysis of the algorithm as an independent social actor.

METHODS

For this study, I collected data from Nicki Minaj's Twitter stans, known as the Barbz, around the release of her fifth studio album, *Pink Friday 2*. The name *Barbz* is a shortening of *Barbie*, a significant symbol to Minaj's brand of femininity — she markets herself as a real-life Barbie. Minaj has a strong connection to both Black and queer communities, whose influence over online language is widely recognized (Davis 2021). She is also an ideal inflection point for this study because the Barbz are so extreme in their devotion. Nicki Minaj's husband, Kenneth Petty, is a registered sex offender. Minaj has rigorously defended him, and, in 2021, she was sued for the harassment and intimidation of Jennifer Hough, his accuser, although these charges were later dropped from the lawsuit (Burke and Dasrath 2022; Jacobs 2021). Yet, the Barbz stood by her, and, to this day, some choose to ignore and conceal these details rather than confront and address them. In 2024, a more public audience came into knowledge of these events when Megan Thee Stallion's single "HISS" referenced Megan's Law, which requires sex offenders to register publicly, a lyric thought by many to be directed at Minaj. When she was losing much of her public support, Barbz fiercely defended Minaj, demonstrating stanhood as a commitment that extends beyond fandom. This unflinching devotion sets stan communities apart from the mainstream and encourages them to construct semi-permeable boundaries between their own groups and the general public.

The digital participant observation that I conducted for this study took place on the platform known as Twitter/X — after buying the platform, Elon Musk renamed the platform to X, but users continue to recognize it as Twitter (CivicScience 2023). I began by creating a new Twitter account, following seven Nicki Minaj/stan-oriented accounts identified by my prior knowledge of the community. I catalogued data generally related to Nicki Minaj, with a preference for posts that expressed stanhood or made use of stan language. In this nascent stage, Twitter saw me as a member of the general public, not a Barb, and this process of general engagement established my interests on the platform. As my topics of interest were

identified by Twitter's algorithm, my engagement became more specifically directed to stans and their language. I catalogued posts of interest alongside preceding tweets in the same conversation and noted the perceived role of the post and traits of language (such as visual media and stan-specific terms). I liked tweets that reflected stan devotion and unique language, and retweeted a mixture of posts to maintain diversity in my feed. These were mostly community action, updates, and comedy posts.

While digital ethnography certainly diverges from the traditional model of the heroic ethnographer travelling to foreign shores, my ethnographic method is inspired by previous ethnographies, mainly Boucher (2022), but also Crow (2019). This methodology is based heavily on Blommaert and Dong's (2020) assertion that digital ethnography must privilege participant observation as a partial and embodied mode of data collection, given that disengaged spectatorship is not possible in many online spaces. By immersing myself in the community and its context, both social and spatial, I gained a unique understanding of Barbz and their cultural practice by virtue of my interaction. I collected 279 tweets for analysis from November 2nd until December 16th, 2023, to coincide with the promotion and release of *Pink Friday 2*. This period encompassed both interest identification as well as the insider data collection. 50 tweets came from the seven accounts I initially followed, and 103 were from accounts I followed by the end of data collection — 63% were introduced to me by the algorithm. Of these, I interacted with content 234 times (215 likes, 16 like and retweets, and two retweets). I collected 45 tweets without interaction to give context in the data document.

In early 2023, Twitter released some code aimed at explaining to users how their tweets are interpreted and promoted to other users. Every interaction has a value used to rank tweets and determine which are presented to a user and in what order. Table 1 describes the weights of various interactions on Twitter. For example, a post with 25 likes and three replies would have a value of 93.5. The same post using an unrecognized word would have a new weight of 0.935. However, the algorithm is rough and dynamic, often updated without transparency (Alex 2023). I use this table as a guideline, not as gospel. This framework informs my strategic interactions on the platform, allowing me access to the content I seek.

Action	Weight/Modifier
Like	0.5
Retweet	1
Reply	27
Click in + reply, like, or view for >2 minutes	11
View profile + interact from tweet	12
New/Unknown words	0.01x

Table 1: Interactions and their weight, modified from TweetHunter (Tibo 2023).

I begin my analysis by describing the use of AAVE and ballroom language, both of which I compared using meta-coding, which involved sorting the data into large groups and comparing the overlaps and divergences between them. I interpret these as antagonistic vernacular strategies (Peeters et al. 2021) aimed at delineating community boundaries. I have also chosen to highlight two other areas of interest to conduct a multimodal discourse analysis. First, I describe memeified communication to show the movement of language between public and private audiences. Second, I discuss explicit references to the Twitter algorithm. Each pillar of this analysis outlines strategies that Barbz use in collaboration with Twitter's algorithm to control the borders of their algorithmic community.

THE ALGORITHMIC COMMUNITY

Through the lens of critical discourse analysis, which takes discourse as entangled with power relations, algorithmic engagements are an extension of power structures among users (Maly 2022). By distinguishing themselves from public gazes into discoverable sects, Barbz leverage their social power through their

esoteric language as a strategy to negotiate their publicity. The Barbz become a refracted community by the nature of their interaction with the Twitter algorithm. Through this entanglement, Barbz are not the only actors responsible for the formation of their community; they rely on and influence the algorithm to control key factors like social borders. Thus, Barbz are not simply a digital community, but are an *algorithmic community*.

Oh, We Eating Good: AAVE and Updates

In their employment of AAVE and ballroom language, Barbz signal their interiority while closing their community. My engagement with AAVE and ballroom language as a white researcher is informed by Eckert's (2012) three waves. Consistent with a third-wave study, I maintain that linguistic traits do not index groups of people, but rather, they describe how language is used in its social context. In total, I labelled 72 tweets as using AAVE (26%). Of these posts using AAVE, only two were intended to be 'update' or 'archive' posts, which generally provide information about an idol's life and career (Malik and Haidar 2023). Updates are intentionally accessible and invite detection by people outside the stan community. When users post updates aimed at the general public, they tend to use Standard English and include ample and reliable detail, positioning themselves to fit into a specific social landscape. However, when stans want to limit their audience, sharing information that is only relevant to stans, they break the rules of updating and vary their English from Standard. My observed use of AAVE on stan Twitter was heavily connected to posts that were designed to have a defined audience, as of the 25 catalogued update posts, only two broke the stylistic norm of accessible posts aimed at the general public, both of which used AAVE.

In one such overlap, @minajtrollz updates on Nicki Minaj's recent accomplishments, concluding their list with "ohhh we eating good!" While *eating* is ballroom language, *we eating* demonstrates an absent copula *are*, which is a feature of AAVE. Despite being embedded in a public update, @minajtrollz' use of "we" implies a defined in-group as the intended audience for this post, not a broad public. The other post, by @ONIKASTHONG, proclaims, "Streets saying Nicki dropping something at midnight." This post is updating on a rumoured surprise release at midnight. Even though it is public, because it discusses an unconfirmed midnight release, this post is likely targeting Barbz, stans who are devoted enough to stay up until midnight monitoring Spotify, Apple Music, and social media for signs of a release. And, indeed, there was no release that night. The update posts that used AAVE provided information to an in-group of stans, rather than accessible updates which appealed to the public.

While 'the updater' is a defined role in stan communities (Malik and Haidar 2023), anyone can post update tweets and neither @ONIKASTHONG nor @minajtrollz are strictly update accounts. A more normative example of updates comes from @1nickiminajfan_ (Figure 1), who used AAVE in one non-update post while two other tweets used Standard English in their efforts of promotion and updating on newly announced performances. These posts were clear and specific, providing information for fans to materially support Nicki:

> @1nickiminajfan_: ALL IRRELEVANT MATTERS OFF THE TL [timeline]!! #PINKFRIDAY2 12/08/23 🐿 GET READY FOR #JINGLEBALL2023 🎄 Mon Chicago 12/04 AllStateArena Thursday Atl 12/14 StateFarmArena @poweratl

Similar patterns of code-switching between broadcast and private addresses have been observed in traditional interest groups like an ethnic Italian community, where important information was spoken in Standard English while personal discourse incorporated Italian words and phrases (De Fina 2007). Instead of vaguely implying the tweet's subject, as in the posts using AAVE, @1nickiminajfan_'s promotional tweets provided all relevant information for anyone to understand and act by making a purchase. The use of AAVE in update tweets reinforces that the intelligibility of language on the internet is known and strategically employed to define audiences. In employing AAVE, stans intentionally place themselves in the digital and social margin, forcing others to decentre themselves in order to engage with Barb content.

Figure 1: "ALL IRRELEVANT MATTERS OFF THE TL" @1nickiminajfan_

Nicki Minaj Ate Once Again: Ballroom Language and Sentiment

Ballroom language was similarly used to decentre discussions on Twitter. I identified 29 tweets that used ballroom language (10%). The most common uses of ballroom language came through the words *eat/ate/fed* and *gag*, with eleven and thirteen occurrences, respectively. *To eat* is used to describe an impressive accomplishment (Davis 2021). For example, when @barbiecharts (Figure 2) says that "nicki minaj ate once again i'm sorry 😭" attaching a photo of *Pink Friday 2* promotional art, they mean that Nicki looks great in the photo. On the other hand, to gag means to be extremely impressed (Davis 2021). When @ONIKASTHONG says, "The features on PF2 must be gag worthy because every single from the album so far has been solo," they are implying that Nicki wants her listeners to be shocked at the calibre of her collaborations on *Pink Friday 2*.

While seven of the 29 ballroom tweets were aggressive — used for criticizing Nicki, censuring other Twitter users, or hating on the opposition — over three-quarters of these posts, even some that were critical, used ballroom language as a way to express positive sentiment. Only two of these seven posts actually used ballroom language in order to express negative sentiment. Both tweets used

Figure 2: @barbiecharts, "nicki minaj ate once again im sorry 😭 "

the same word: *chop*. This word comes from the practice of walking in balls, where judges score contestants' performances; a chop from any judge disqualifies a contestant from walking (i.e. competing) in the next round of a category (Davis 2021). @MARAJTEAM_, who says that the *Pink Friday 2* track "Pink Birthday" is a *chop*, is expressing that the song did not meet their expectations and cannot compete with the other songs on the album. This may be an effect of the ballroom scene itself, which is focused deeply on repairing the successes, community, and positions denied to Black and Latin queer people and trans women (Molé 2021; Skinner 2021).

Stans divide themselves from the general public in order to keep their conversations private. A similar instance of language variation as a protective measure was described in Johnson et al. (2006), where a major role of marijuana argot was to protect the group from encroachment by and confusion with other groups by defining it as a separate, cohesive entity. The employment of ballroom language to express positive sentiment indicates that language varies from standard English only as a

means to conceal criticism from the general public. However, this does not explain the Barbz' decision to hide their praise of Nicki. The portrait of the narcissistic fan (McLuhan 1994; Sandvoss 2003) is a useful tool to unpack this exclusive in-group dynamic. Stans are engaged in a process of self-definition through the rejection of others. By defining themselves in opposition to non-stan others, Barbz become exceptional in their connection to celebrity, and exclude others to maintain this status. One ethnography of K-pop fandom showed this boundary to be similarly policed along lines of capital, rather than celebrity (Abd-Rahim 2019). For many, fan status is directly related to the economic capital used to support the idol's chart successes, a level of devotion to the ownership and consumption of the product that is not found among casual fans.

Other theories would argue that in hiding their extreme devotion, stans are protecting both themselves and Nicki Minaj from *memetic violence*, which severs the individual's control over their online presentation (Halliday 2018). In memetic violence, the image of the meme supplants the whole person, or in this case, the community. Limiting their discussions to a specific audience helps Barbz to avoid placing their idol on this "technological auction block" (Halliday 2018, 69). Barbz also conceal their fanaticism in an effort to avoid being labelled deviant. For Nicki to be ridiculed is for the Barbz to be humiliated. In sum, the strange language used by stans online can be framed as algorithmic repositioning to protect and preserve their community's uniqueness without the risk of unwanted attention.

What Happens in Gag City...: Memes and Community Belonging

In the weeks leading up to *Pink Friday 2*'s release, Barbz were dismayed. With no lead singles released for over 2 months before the album, no tracklist, and no music videos in sight, the album was well known among the Barbz, but the general public was far less conscious. Without the sheer numbers of casual fans and undevoted outsiders supporting Nicki Minaj, the album had little chance of performing well on the Billboard Music Charts, let alone breaking chart records. These metrics

are crucial in the eyes of many stans, who compare Nicki's impressive numbers to those of her enemies like Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion. To break into the mainstream, many stan groups across the internet transmit crucial information to the general public by placing themselves on the Trending page of their chosen SNS. Barbz began joking about "Gag City," a utopian world illustrated by glossy pink AI-generated cityscapes to promote *Pink Friday 2* on public Twitter. The city itself is a fictional utopia, a mecca that Barbz would travel to when the album was released (Figure 3). This meme went viral and was trending number one on Twitter for a couple of days, with many Barbz seeing it as one of the main reasons that *Pink Friday 2* saw commercial success.
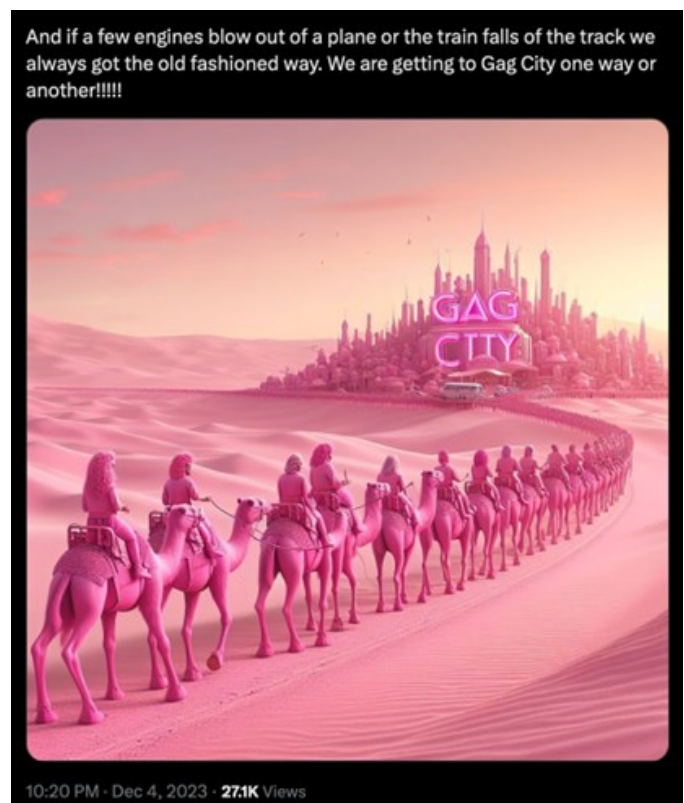
Figure 3: @[J_PF2], "And if a few engines blow out of a plane or the train falls of the track we always got the old fashioned way. We are getting to Gag City one way or an-other!!!!!"

Pursuant to its virality, the ownership of Gag City was hotly debated throughout the stan community. Who can talk about Gag City, who 'created' it, and when should it be invoked? Some Barbz were vocal about their ownership over Gag City. In response to a photo of rising pop star Addison Rae captioned, "She's taking us to gag city," @oncemisty responded, "See how they slowly take away our lingo and make

it seem like a common usage? Y'all need to leave us alone actually." This extreme comment did not come unprompted: some Cardi B stans believed that Gag City was a phrase introduced by their BardiGang. While the language of Gag City was significantly more open than the other Barb conversations I came across in my research, it was still fiercely protected as the language of an insider group.

Figure 4: @oncemisty, "See how they slowly take away our lingo and make it seem like a common usage? Y'all need to leave us alone actually."

Over 44 days of data collection, Gag City arose in only the final eight days, yet accounted for fifteen of the tweets collected overall and had a comparable rate of occurrence over time to AAVE. The meme became an important part of the way I experienced Barbz on stan Twitter in the leadup to *Pink Friday 2* and has since been adopted as a part of Nicki's brand.

Barbz used several linguistic strategies to send Gag City posts to the general public audience as a promotional tactic. Many posts used Gag City as a hashtag, directly signalling their intent to send the post to a broader audience. One user created an update thread to compile corporate brands' engagement with

Figure 4: @Envyonika's thread chronicling mainstream engagement with Gag City

the trend as seen in Figures 4 and 5, further emphasizing the mainstreaming of the trend. There were only two Gag City posts that employed AAVE, and none that used ballroom language (aside from *gag*, which was not essential to the meaning of the posts). While discussion around the memes did include mentions of stan groups, few directly mentioned Barbz. One 'tag yourself' style post outlined Gag City neighbourhoods and their residents, actively inviting people to declare themselves Barbz by using the language of Gag City. Alongside the above discussion of subculture and language, these qualities suggest that the definition of an audience impacts linguistic variance and that language is used agentively to augment this audience definition. When they want public discussion, Barbz avoid encoding their content. Further, when users began discussing the use of Gag City by opposing groups, they use subtweeting, an indirect reply that does not link or mention the original poster, to vary their language (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). This is clear in the earlier example from @SleezeMaraj about 'stealing our lingo.' These deviations fit into the

Figure 5: @Envyonika's thread chronicling mainstream engagement with Gag City

Figure 6: @NutterButter, "SUPER FREAKY NUTTER LOADING................."

model of language use that I have outlined, effectively hiding these conversations from the outsiders engaging with the now-trending topic of Gag City.

The spread of Gag City was celebrated by Barbz as a testament to the disproportionately large impact of their community. As @minajtrollz remarked, "#GagCity is trending #1 [...] major platforms promoting Gag City, other fanbases already trying to replicate 😊I'm loving the energy!" In fact, a number of brands hopped on the train to Gag City and promoted the album, including Nutter Butter, BIC pens, Chili's Grill and Bar, and Bing (Figure 6).

Many Barbz also brought companies into Gag City themselves. For example,

@MinajPlaylist shared a photo (Figure 7) they generated using AI of the Billboard music chart's headquarters in Gag City. However, when Billboard penalized Nicki Minaj for incentivizing the Barbz to buy multiple copies of *Pink Friday 2* as part of a contest, @PINKBAWBIE constructed a narrative to exile the offending figure from the city (Figure 8). Finally, @camaronomarion showed a photo of Billboard's new offices in Dud City, presumably a slum near Gag City (Figure 8). This reference to Nicki's career history privileges Barbz with orthodox cultural knowledge of music industry politics (Bourdieu 1984). Discontent with the "corporate giants and machines that went against [Nicki]" was not expressed using standard English, and instead was encoded through symbolism (Minaj, Drake, and Lil Wayne 2021).

This symbolic communication through images and memes serves in part to provide dense networks of reproducible references that are inaccessible to outsiders (McCulloch 2019). Memeified communication divides a public into classes, which are then policed through proper cultural engagement. Yet memes are also a powerful tool of community on the internet, playing on the electrifying feeling of being in on the joke (McCulloch 2019). The Barbz do make their language accessible to a broader audience; they are not strictly closed. Where

Gag City invites outsiders to be in on the joke, it demonstrates that memes may be used to encode messages, especially if publicity is under negotiation. Barbz strategically exclude and include outsiders in order to best support Nicki Minaj. The meme insider and Barb social circles merged as Gag City made its way into the mainstream.

Figure 7: @MinajPlaylist, ".@billboard is now open at Gag City..."; Figure 8: @PINKBAWBIE, "BYE BITCH"; Figure 9: @camaronomarion, "drone footage by gag city pd shows billboard has just popped up in dud city!"

Help Put These People in the Algorithm: Intentional Closure

On December 3, towards the start of the Gag City trend, @sleezeSTAN directly addressed the relationship between Barbz and the algorithm twice. These tweets present the algorithm as a tool to keep Barbz' conversations closed and maintain the strength and unity of the community. Their first tweet was a long-form callout to Barbz, who were interacting with hate posts leading up to the album's release. @sleezeSTAN cautioned the Barbz against various forms of interaction that do not align with the Barbz' mission including "accounts using nickis name while using duds names to put them in the algorithm." A dud is a detractor, often a rival artist who is believed to divert attention (and thereby success) from Nicki (figure 9). Barbz may be inadvertently supporting other artists through their engagement with other non-Barb users, even if their intent is to maintain their idol's dignity. This somewhat paranoid need for authenticity stems from an emic understanding that the Barbz are a fundamentally algorithmic community.

@sleezeSTAN is advocating for further closure of the stan community because the proximity of Nicki's name to the so-called duds will lead to the duds freeloading off Nicki's success and the Barbz' devotion. For example, when a Barb interacts with an account discussing the conflicting dates of Tate McRae and Nicki Minaj's album releases, they are inadvertently promoting Tate McRae's album, too. Some Barbz addressed @sleezeSTAN's concern by subtweeting about the topic rather than mentioning names.

Similarly, people who post content that is not related to Nicki Minaj may be seen as "fake barbz" in their unfaithfulness to her. These interlopers pose an entirely different issue with the algorithm altogether. Such "irrelevant matters," as quoted by @1nickiminajfan_, are not simply a matter of unflinching allegiance to the idol —they have real implications for the Barbz' community. The second tweet mentioning the algorithm was a subtweet aimed at another user who was supportive of Nicki's music competition, "y'all help put these people in the algorithm," accompanied by a

SpongeBob meme (@sleezeSTAN). Here, @sleezeSTAN emphasizes the relational aspect of the algorithm, that someone can be "put in" the algorithm by others. They are on the right path: Twitter's algorithm assembles a feed of posts from a community of people whom the user does not follow by determining shared interests and shared social circles (Tibo 2023). By engaging with inauthentic Barbz, the power of language as a tool to define the limits of the Barb community is diluted. Unchecked divergence from the topic of Nicki Minaj will lead to a weakening of the Barbz themselves.

Stans cannot accommodate diverse interests because of their reliance on the vacillating algorithm to stay hidden together. The prioritization of content relating only to Nicki functions to communicate boundaries in a way that is intelligible to the algorithm. When users only post about and interact with content regarding Nicki Minaj, their feeds are less likely to contain content that is unrelated due to the algorithm's perception of shared interests. By keeping their interactions limited to a single topic, it is less likely for Barbz that their posts appear on the feeds of general audiences and non-Barb stans, who will go on to not engage with these posts that do not interest them. Such complications all serve to tell the algorithm that these social circles do not overlap. By policing language at the foundation of their community, Barbz consciously define their own boundaries.

CONCLUSION: A QUESTION FOR THE CULTURE

The overlapping sites of language, fandom, and the internet show how the algorithm treats users as subjects of a system while also allowing them opportunities to negotiate with the platform itself as agents. Resting at this intersection is a debate about the restructuring power of the agent in a structured setting. Barbz come together as an algorithmic community. Driven by and reliant on Twitter's algorithm, I watched the Barbz use language to enter a co-constitutive relationship with the platform itself. This algorithmic community allowed them to reshape the semi-permeable borders of their group.

Language, fandom, and the internet model the interplay between structure and agency. No single field is ever fully granted primacy. Exploring the role that language plays in online stan communities brings a fresh perspective to the existing body of research on both fandom and digital studies. This study explores an individual moment in time, using subjective participant observation. The algorithm-centred participant observation modelled in this study can and should be interrogated by future researchers from a more distanced standpoint. Data collected in participant observation could be supplemented by data collected through API scraping, which is less subject to algorithmic interference. A quantitative analysis of the language used by Barbz could determine the prevalence of these linguistic variance strategies on Twitter. Other future explorations could adopt the position of a casual fan to understand the functionality of this algorithmic collaboration. Finally, there is a need to operationalize *stan* as a label in fandom and Internet studies in order to deepen our analyses of online dynamics and the negotiation of publicity.

Barbz come into community alongside the algorithm, not in spite of it or because of it. This continuous active negotiation with the platform is necessary for the community to stay together. By acknowledging the often-ignored role that the algorithm plays in online community, we are able to explain some of the perplexing behaviour that we observe online. The algorithm bridges the social structure of the Internet with the agency of the individual. The algorithm may seem like some mystical, incognizable Other, but the reality is that we are already comfortably engaged in reciprocal relationships with it. By understanding its centrality to the Barbz' online community, the algorithm comes to light as an important social actor in all online relationships. However, many digital ethnographies ignore the algorithm in favour of a neat, direct yet ultimately inaccurate person-to-person model of mediated social life. Resisting this co-constitutive relationship is an Edenic fantasy. Our increasing entanglement with the algorithm is emblematic of a new and necessary cast of key players in social and cultural life. By highlighting the role that algorithms play in the formation of online

communities and working with, rather than against them to learn more about online world-making activities, researchers of digital social life can approach a better model of online life and culture.

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Queering the Dialogue: How Young Adults Are Redefining Sex and Safe Sex

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ABSTRACT

On liberal arts campuses across the United States, about 40% of students are identifying as LGBTQ+ according to a study cited by The College Fix (Peppiatt 2022). While many surveys have collected data on the sexual orientations of students, few have assessed how students are having sex and what safe sex measures they may be using. In a cultural climate that discourages sexual knowledge and offers limited sex education, young adults are defining sex and sexual safety for themselves. This research is framed in the context of symbolic interactionism, discourse theory, and sexual scripts. This research uses eight interviews with liberal arts college students, predominantly queer, to glean personal experiences of sexual learning, sexual safety, and their perceptions and definitions of 'sex.' This study suggests that young adults have reacted to heteronormative norms and limited sexual education with their own dialogical understandings of sex and sexual safety which I consider a 'queering of the dialogue.' The results demonstrate that current approaches to sexual education set young adults up for unsafe sex and that dialogue is an integral tool for sexual safety and the vastness of queer sex.

Keywords: Queerness, safe sex, dialogue, symbolic interactionism, USA

Sex is kind of scary. Jess voiced their sexual education experience during middle and high school. At that time, Jess was unsure about their identity, still presenting as a straight female, and strayed away from asking "nerve-racking" questions about queerness or sexual safety that their school curriculum did not cover in fear of judgment from teachers and peers. Jess was not alone; many young adults I spoke with during this study reported that their sexual education had adhered to heteronormative sexual scripts in a way that left them without sexual knowledge. Using semi-structured interviews and an anonymous survey, I investigate how young adults are making sense of their own queerness, sex, sexual safety, and sexual education. Many of these respondents identified as queer in some manner. I conducted this ethnographic research at Goucher College in Towson, Maryland. During these interviews, respondents demonstrated a consistent trend of understanding sex and sexual safety as dialogic. I argue that young adults are redefining sex and sexual safety for themselves through a "queering of the dialogue," using a form of interpersonal agreement to construct their sexual safety and contextualize their sexual relationships. I will also demonstrate that the heteronormative education that they have received has harmed the sexual safety of queer young adults by omitting queerness in sexual education and, in turn, making queer sexual safety invisible.

Sex as a Concept

I frame my research using symbolic interactionism, analyzing how sexuality and its meanings are maintained by human interaction. Instead of focusing on the biological aspects of sexuality, symbolic interactionism emphasizes how "sexual practice and identities have meaning only through a collective social understanding and agreement of their significance in the social world" (Power, McNair, and Carr 2009, 69). From the same symbolic interactionist framework derives sexual script theory, which analyzes how powerful social structures like patriarchy are incorporated and practiced by individuals in their own lives. Sexual scripts are perceived cultural expectations which individuals use to "order and judge" their own behaviors of romantic and sexual relationships (Power, McNair, and Carr 2009, 69). As social norms influence individuals, so too do individuals influence 'normal.' To understand this process of constructing a status quo around sex, I turn to Michel Foucault's discourse theory. Discourse theory highlights the roles language and communication play in constructing a shared reality, as well as the role power plays in prioritizing certain realities (see also Robinson 2018). Not only do patriarchal ideals of sex affect individuals from the macro-societal level, but they are also reinforced by individuals in their own interpersonal dialogues. Sexual script theory and discourse theory demonstrate dialogue's salience in defining sexual norms and molding individual sexualities.

Using this symbolic interactionist framework, 'sex' is defined and bound by collective attitudes and beliefs of a given culture (Power, McNair, and Carr 2009). In a heteronormative society such as the United States, 'sex' is bound to heterosexuality and patriarchy. Because of this, penetration is considered central and primary to defining 'sex.' In a 2007 study comparing young adults' attitudes around the definition of sex to that of a 1991 cohort, researchers found that oral sex was considered sex 40% of the time in 1991 but only 20% of the time in 2007 (Hans, Gillen, and Akande 2010; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007). As an important framing device, the researchers point out the prevalence of President Bill Clinton's 1998 affair and his insistence that he did not have 'sexual relations' with Monica Lewinsky. Oral sex was the most intimate act of the affair, yet Clinton's insistence that this was *not* sex very publicly defined oral-genital contact as outside the definition of sex (Hans, Gillen, and Akande

2010). There are further public health implications to this cultural frame when "oral-genital contact represents the next most risky sexual behavior [after penile-vaginal/anal intercourse]" (Hans, Gillen, and Akande 2010, 77). Oral-genital contact carries the risk for numerous STDs—including HIV—yet, in 2010, 10% of young adults did not know STDs can be transferred through this contact and condom/dental dam use during oral sex remains low (Hans, Gillen, and Akande 2010). 'Sex' and 'risk' are thus shaped by changing cultural contexts in ways that have significant effects on public health and individual decision-making.

There are cultural motivations to defining an act as 'sex' or 'not sex' for young adults globally. In rural Zimbabwe, Mavhu and colleagues (2008) found that the language used in their questionnaires had a profound impact on respondents' self-reporting and willingness to accept their sexual activities as sex or not sex. In the Shona language, there is no specific word or phrase for vaginal-penetrative sex. Due to the ambiguity of colloquialisms such as 'to sleep together,' respondents' self-reporting did not deny or confirm intercourse or consent (Mavhu et al. 2008). Social expectations of young women to remain pure motivated them to hide their sexual activity in the fuzziness of language, so as not to appear "loose" (Mavhu et al. 2008, 566). Thus, one's role in a sexual encounter and gender identity can create different definitions of 'sex.' In the United States, Peterson, and Muehlenhard (2007) found a high level of uncertainty in self-reporting 'sex' and 'not sex.' Respondents were motivated to label activities, ranging from manual manipulation of genitalia to vaginal penetration, as 'not sex' because having engaged in 'sex' would mean they had cheated on a partner, were not heterosexual, were no longer a 'virgin,' or had broken their own moral or religious code. Other respondents were motivated to label ambiguous or vague sexual activities as 'sex' to appear more sexually experienced (Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007). These findings demonstrate a cognitive and social element to defining sex as a way of making sense of the self in society. There is personhood at stake in sexual encounters, wherein one's identity is attached to sexual activities that hold bearing on one's worth in a social hierarchy.

Outside of heterosexual discourse, sexual and cultural subgroups create and reinforce their own set of sexual attitudes and knowledge to accommodate risk and define 'sex' and 'safer sex' in practical ways. Jeffrey Escoffier (1998), scholar and queer rights activist, describes how gay vernacular knowledge and discourse grew with the HIV/AIDS epidemic and replicated. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's power-knowledge and discourse theory, as well as Antonio Gramsci's 'common sense,' Escoffier (1998) describes 'safer sex' as an agreed-upon framework in the gay community. "Each community provides a context and knowledge that grows up in that community and typical activities of that community," informing its members on what sex is, how to have it safely, and how to hold accurate discourse surrounding sex and safe sex (Escoffier 1998, 7).

Sexual Knowledge and Attitudes

Peers and Parents

One of many sources of sex knowledge for young adults is family and peers. In a longitudinal study conducted from 1990 to 2006, young adults' primary source of sex information came from peers, and same-gender peers before opposite-gender peers (Sprecher, Harris, and Meyers 2008). Gender is an inescapable dimension affecting sexual knowledge diffusion. Up to this point, the literature I have reviewed classifies gender by a binary, separating male and female responses and, in the process, marginalizing non-binary and other queer gender identities (Hans, Gillen, and Akande 2010; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007; Sprecher, Harris, and Meyers 2008). This demonstrates a wide gap in current research. While my research aims to examine sexuality outside of the gender binary, it is important to analyze the ways the heteronormative dichotomy of female and male affects the learning and teaching of young people. Young people's perceived gender shapes the way parents, teachers, and peers interact with, teach, and raise them. Young women receive greater attention from teachers, parents, and peers in sexual education than their male counterparts, contributing to a gendered

burden of sexual knowledge (Sprecher, Harris, and Meyers 2008; Dilip, Mishra, and Acharya 2018). Gender influences how the familial institution diffuses sexual knowledge as well. "Mothers were rated higher as a source of sex education than fathers for females, and, interestingly, mothers were also a more common source than fathers for males" (Sprecher, Harris, and Meyers 2008, 21). Although the institution of the family can be a source of education, it may also be a source of fear, and, therefore, young adults may avoid discussing sex with parents at all costs in which case sexual knowledge is sought from outside interpersonal relationships (Dilip, Mishra, and Acharya 2018).

The institution of education, societal trends, and the media

Several studies discuss the impact that institutional sex education had on young adults' sexual knowledge. Cook and Wynn (2021, 11) conducted interviews with Australian young adults, finding that their definitions of safe sex were "not only in biomedical terms such as disease transmission and pregnancy but also in terms of the social and psychological consequences of sexual encounters, with an emphasis on consent." And while discussion of the social nature of sex is lacking in existing classes, access to sexual education of any kind is a larger issue. Currently, there is no federal standard for sexual education in the United States, and very few states have a standard or requirement at all. In comparison, Australia has a nation-wide, mandatory sexual health curriculum (Victoria Department of Education 2021). While the two nations diverge greatly in sexual education, I utilize two Australian studies surrounding sexuality to ground my own research methods. Overall, Cook and Wynn (2021) offer insight into how young adults in the Western world make sense of cultural trends, targeted sexual education, and their own sexuality.

Morgan (2011) found that many young adults engage with sexually explicit media, influencing their personal sexual behaviors. A trend toward higher frequency and variability in the types of material, physical or online pornography, used was associated with more

sexual preferences regarding identity and sexual activity type (Morgan 2011). Online pornography is not the only media to affect sexual knowledge and behavior. Sex information in the media "may be inaccurate and even harmful, [but] the media also can be a source of accurate and helpful information about sex in the form of public health messages about condom use and other safe-sex practices" (Sprecher, Harris, and Meyers 2008, 18). What information young adults receive from education and the media has wide effects, although the status of both sources' information is incredibly variable.

Contraceptive Choices and Complicated Sexual Decision-Making

Contraceptives, many feminist scholars argue, were inventions of liberation. Kronenfeld and Whicker (1986) describe the way in which the birth control pill changed women's social roles by allowing them fertility autonomy and therefore familial and occupational power. Contraception and autonomy are inherently linked in feminist theory, yet the only contraceptive methods which do not require a medical professional's permission are condoms, centering the act of penetration as sex (Kronenfeld and Whicker 1986). Today, most contraceptives are available only to people with wombs. While this facilitates a level of autonomy for women, it also represents a weighty gendered responsibility on female-bodied people to procure and maintain contraceptive devices.

Sexual health responsibility is also aligned with larger social issues of access, class, and gender roles. Wu and Mark (2018) speak to class, arguing the need for universal contraceptive access as a means to raise well-being and lessen poverty. Social gender norms "associate women with reproduction and distance men from it," argues Lisa Campo-Engelstein (2011, 22), as she analyzes the relationships individuals have with their contraceptive devices, especially men. It is not that men cannot take responsibility for their sexual health, so much as social systems deny them full autonomy over contraceptive decisions. Currently, the only options for men to avoid unwanted pregnancy are vasectomies

or a male condom (Campo-Engelstein 2011). Limited contraceptive choices create limited sexual autonomy, regardless of gender identity.

Campo-Engelstein (2011) directs attention to how side effects factor into contraceptive decision-making. Unwanted side effects account for 50% of discontinuation of a contraceptive device after one year, with many respondents reporting using the "best worst option" because changing contraceptive methods was too burdensome (Campo-Engelstein 2011, 23). Lesser-studied factors include the personal experiences with different contraceptive options, levels of perceived and real STD/STI risk associated with the methods, and why young adults choose their contraceptive method.

Much of the literature reviewed here has discussed contraception solely in terms of managing unwanted pregnancy. Yet, one major issue in addressing young adults' sexual health needs is sexual knowledge surrounding STIs and how to make 'safe sex' decisions when contraceptive options are limited and sexual encounters are socially complicated. Robinson (2018) conducted interviews with gay men, analyzing how they manage HIV risk in their sexual lives through a lens of symbolic interactionism. With new or irregular partners, men were likely to employ condom use. With regular partners, as a symbol of greater intimacy and trust, condoms were not used (Robinson 2018). This finding points to a portion of intimate relationships that abandon 'safe sex' discourse for the sociality of sex. Non-use of a condom in a close relationship may be a symbol that a partner is no longer seen as a risk (Power, McNair, and Carr 2009; Robinson 2018). A spectrum ranging from risk to trust has implications for other safe sex concepts, such as desire and consent.

'Safe sex' goes beyond biomedical considerations and includes psychological wellbeing and autonomy in sexual encounters. Vannier and O'Sullivan (2010, 433) observed sexual scripts or "implicit social contracts" in long term, heterosexual relationships to perform sexually even when one partner was not experiencing sexual desire. This 'social contract' implies an unspoken concept of consent between partners, no less real to those

involved than an explicit 'yes' or 'no.' In real life dynamics of relationships, sex may overrule 'safe sex' concepts of consent, such as mutual desire and explicit permission to engage in intercourse. All sexual encounters are steeped in agreed-upon beliefs that bleed into decision-making. They are made even more complicated as cultural sexual scripts inform individuals as to how 'conventional' sex should occur.

Gendered and Discriminatory Misinformation

Gendered, racist, transphobic, and heteronormative disparities became plainly patterned throughout the literature that I reviewed. García (2009) conducted a study with 40 Latina female students, average age 16, who had received sexual education in Chicago public schools between 1998 and 2002. Young Latina students were often scolded for knowing 'too much' or for asking questions, as interest or curiosity were associated with sexually active 'other girls,' reifying a good girl/bad girl dichotomy. In 28 accounts, students reported that teachers referred to promiscuous or pregnant Latina youth as 'other girls' and told respondents to ask these girls their sexual questions rather than in the classroom. These assumptions by teachers, informed by racial and gendered stereotypes of Latina girls, limited the level of comprehensive sexual knowledge Latina youth received, especially regarding access to non-heterosexual knowledge. The stereotyping of presumed hyper-fertile and heterosexual Latina young women centralized "pregnancy prevention lessons… informed by the heteronormative designation of sexual relations and bodies as heterosexually reproductive," with an effect of limited sexual education (García 2009, 532).

Misinformation targeting queer young adults was also a common pattern. Britton and colleagues (2020) found that a common misconception among trans men was that testosterone therapy would be a reliable contraceptive method. Kaestle and Waller (2011) found that 'sexual minority' young adults were highly unaware of their risk for STD/STI contraction. Of these young adults, young women, especially lesbian and bisexual women,

were likely to believe they were at low risk for bacterial infection *because* of their sexuality (Kaestle and Waller 2021). Queer sexuality research and discourse has focused on gay men predominantly in a way that has marginalized and endangered queer-femme health (Kaestle et al. 2021; Power, McNair, and Carr 2009). Power, McNair, and Carr (2009) found that lesbians in Melbourne, Australia are unlikely to follow sexual health information targeted at gay and heterosexual people, meanwhile, lesbian-specific knowledge is limited and impractical. An important manifestation of this comes to fruition in dental dam use, a barrier method for cunnilingus which was originally created for dentistry. A dental dam must be held in place during oral sex, and it covers the vaginal entrance, making its use impractical considering the activities it limits, such as finger penetration. Of the 300 lesbian and bisexual women who participated in the questionnaire, less than half implemented an STI risk management method, and only one respondent used dental dams (Power, McNair, and Carr 2009).

Lesbian sex is often labelled as "subversive," lacking the penetration by penis that many associate with "real sex" (Power, McNair, and Carr 2009, 68). Several of Power and colleagues' (2009) respondents reported having heard or believing themselves that lesbian sex is not real sex. Power, McNair, and Carr (2009) incite a necessary conversation surrounding lesbian and bisexual women's sex, and they highlight how it still operates under a binary that classifies all respondents as women. Ultimately, there is little research surrounding the sexualities of people who identify outside of a gender binary. This study aims to highlight nonbinary/queer sexualities and investigate how young adults navigate their sexual decisions and risk. I add to the concept of sexual scripts from symbolic interactionism and discourse theory by demonstrating how young adults are dialogically negotiating their variable sexual knowledge, queer or non-queer identities, and sexual safety in their sex lives.

Methods

To connect the sexual history background of young adults to their current sexual beliefs and

safety practices, I conducted eight semi-structured interviews with peers I have a comfortable rapport with. I sampled both queer and non-queer voices: Freddie is the only straight, cisgendered male respondent while all other respondents identified as queer either in gender and/or sexual orientation. I did not offer respondents a standardized definition of queerness in order to honor their self-determination and to acknowledge the expansiveness of their own queerness.

Comfort was a main priority in discussing sexuality. This study received research ethics clearance by Goucher College before I asked peers by email if they would be comfortable speaking with me about sex. Interviews took place in private settings, either in dorm rooms or library study rooms, and lasted between 30 minutes and one hour each. I had interviewees sign a consent form following a discussion of their rights as respondents. Like Cook and Wynn (2021), I used open-ended questions to allow respondents to self-define things like sex, sexual safety, and queerness in order to analyze the wide range of their experiences and beliefs. In addition to these interviews, I created an anonymous online survey of contraceptive decision-making, hanging a QR code and invitation around Goucher College for students to use at their leisure. The first of the survey questions asked for consent to take part in my study and agreement that the respondent was 18 years of age or older. All interview and survey respondents were between the ages of 18 and 24. In total, I collected 76 survey responses in which respondents self-reported their gender identity, which contraceptives they use/have used, and why they chose their method of choice.

I open-coded interviews, labeling key findings and patterned themes through each interview. Having developed a list of codes, I organized the codes into categories and used these to develop the themes presented below. I coded surveys similarly, grouping gender identities and motivations for contraception use into broad categories. I created a table of reported contraceptive devices used; see Figure 1. As for thematic elements between interviews and surveys, I found that queerness necessitates a redefinition of the notions of sex

and sexual safety that heteronormativity enforces, dialogue is integral to young adults' sexuality and sexual knowledge, and contraceptive decisions are complicated by heteronormative education and queer omission.

Findings

Queerness Expands Definitions of Sex

Young adults are performing an act of redefinition of sex and sexuality, one that portrays the diversity of gender, relationships, and pleasure. Interviewees discussed sex as something transcending physical action and more akin to a dialogue, a feeling of intimacy, and a conversation of consent. Heteronormative notions of sex tend toward the rigidity of penetration as sex, while queerness is in movement, expanding the horizon of sex definitions. Queerness defies rigidity, and through it interviewees referred to queer identity as a "horizon of possibility," as quoted by queer theorist David Halperin (Lee 2019). Defined by pleasure and not reproduction, the activities that the concept of 'sex' can encompass swell, as Quinn (non-binary) explained when asked to define sex for themselves, "I have, personally, a broader view of what sex is versus, like, what is thought of as the default reproductive sex... It's, I think, involving touching, interacting with sexual areas. But what makes it sex is probably consent and pleasure for both parties."

So, sex is not defined by action but instead by the presence of certain interpersonal interactions: the agreement and maintenance of consent and the goal of mutual pleasure. The horizon of possibility is structured by these interpersonal behaviors and determined by a dialogue between partners of a sexual encounter. Consent is maintained by dialogue, personal pathways to pleasure verbalized, and the activities of the partnership's 'sex' agreed upon through dialogue. Because 'sex' is created by agreement, sex does not necessarily require touch, as Percy (nonbinary/trans masculine) explained with the example of erotic vomiting. Erotic vomiting, for example, occurs in a public space when one person vomits onto another. It is defined as sex between its active parties because it is found to be sexually pleasurable and is agreed upon as 'sex.' Percy explains, "Sex can be pretty much anything you want it to be. I think anything that someone agrees is sex and everyone's consenting, I'm like, sure, that can be sex, you know? Like, at the end of the day, words are just words."

With consent, dialogue constructs 'sex.' Agreement here is the key, that sex is *made* sex by those who engage in it and define it as such. Percy went on to describe why this is sex, in the vein of queerness, as the defiance against definition or categorization in favor of the full nuance of human experience:

> I don't think there really have to be any rules about what is pleasurable for people and what sex has to be. I don't like the idea that it's just a biological thing, because I think that's stupid... I don't want to like, impose anything on to other people. And I think what's really exciting to me about that idea is that I see sex in an inherently queer way... and it is exciting to me to think of all the possibilities of what that could be for someone. And I wouldn't want to limit that.

The dominant heterosexual notion of sex is limiting for queer people and even for straight people. By allowing for interpersonal dialogue to construct a definition of sex, a wider group of people and behaviors fall into that definition. Young adults now are deconstructing and rejecting heterosexual sex norms. By redefining sex between partners against the dominant, heteronormative structure, more activities are included in 'sex.' Then a new problem arises: how can one define something so inherently subjective as sex?

Most interviewees found the question "How do you define sex?" to be a difficult question to answer. In fact, interviewees found it much easier to define what is *not* sex than what *is* sex. Three interviewees drew a line between kissing and sex, while the other five described that sex cannot be sex when it is coercive or non-consensual emphasizing the importance of consent in defining sex. Although interviewees concluded that an expansive definition of sex is necessary, they mentioned the centrality or

social significance of penetrative/reproductive sex in their definitions and when discussing their own expansive definition as a deviation. Quinn worked toward the 'broad view' definition quoted earlier over the course of a few minutes, first beginning with the idea that sex must involve the touching of genitalia, "Involvement of one or more genitals being thrown around... Well no, actually... ugh. That's hard, sorry, this is a hard question!"

Jess (non-binary/femme androgynous) mirrored this cognitive struggle, voicing that vaginal-penetrative sex had been central to their conception of sex for most of their life. The heteronormative structures implicit and explicit in culture, as well as sexual education, seemingly engrained penetration and the purpose of reproduction into most young peoples' definitions of sex. This was true even if their personal definitions did not adhere to such a heteronormative definition. Importantly, they described that as their queer identity developed, their definition of sex developed in parallel ways. Jess stated, "I feel like, [as] I've let go of like, a rigid construction of my sexual identity and my gender identity, that also...the rigid view I had about sex, I had to morph [it] to fit those properties and to fit like, me."

Heteronormativity thus encloses while queerness expands sex definitions. While recognizing the heterosexual structure, young adults are recognizing that their definitions are different or ever-changing, not simple definitions but redefinitions of sex. Jess continues to explain sex as "a feeling of intimacy with someone at this point. I think if you asked me when I first had sex, it had to be like a penis going into vagina. But I think that's much different now. It's like, the sense of being close with someone in a sexual manner..."

Jess's 'feeling of intimacy' definition was comparable to Luca's (gender fluid), who defined sex as a mindset over an action. The thread of sex definitions presented by these interviewees is comprised of an intimate feeling or mindset and agreement, both in consent and dialogue. Queerness finds validity and flourishes in this definition. The importance interviewees placed on dialogue and agreement in defining sex also carried through to their understandings of safe sex.

Safe Sex: Dialogue and Trust

In discussing safe sex, respondents recognized the importance of STI/STD testing and contraceptive use but focused on the communication of both of those elements. This dialogue surrounding risk and protection was key in defining safe sex for young adults. Between partners, trust is an integral part of defining and creating safe sex. Interviewees demonstrated that safe sex is not so dependent upon contraceptive use or regular testing as much as dialogue and trust between partners. Like sex, sexual safety is an agreement between partners; to use or not use a risk management/contraceptive method, to take on responsibility and hold accountability for STI testing, and to care for the needs of one's partner. Many respondents pressed the importance of consent as a safe sex action as well. It is worth noting that a lack of consent is an issue in both straight and queer relationships. Yet, consent is more explicit in queer dialogues than in the implicit sexual scripts of heterosexual sex. Like Vannier and O'Sullivan (2010) discuss, traditional heterosexual scripts may incite individuals to comply sexually, with or without explicit consent or desire. Whether straight or queer, an ongoing consent dialogue allows partners to explore the nuances of sexual activity and remain mutually informed in the process. A queering of the dialogue, in this sense, allows all social actors to deviate from traditional sexual scripts and define their own 'sex' and 'sexual safety' interpersonally.

Respondents discussed an open attitude as inherent to their conceptions of safe sex, including an ability to discuss sex freely with a partner. This open dialogue may begin before sex and covers safe sex practices such as frequent STI testing, as Joseph (cisgender male) explains, "I define safe sex as informative between your partner. You ask a set of questions. The first line is like, of course, consent... Then asking, like, when's the last time you're tested? Things like that. I always ask everybody when the last time they were tested was..."

This open dialogue allows partners to ask each other about their infection status and preferences for contraception. Partners also feel the ability to share their own testing and

contraception plans, as Quinn mentions. Importantly, whether a partner is up to date with testing is not as important as communicating testing plans and history, "For myself at least, I like to get tested for, you know, STDs just so I can communicate that with whoever I'm hooking up with. I would also like to know if you've been tested recently. It's not necessarily a game changer if they haven't but, you know, it's good to check in." The dialogue continues during the sexual encounter with the purpose of keeping all parties in the know. This is key not only for consent but for ensuring all engaging parties are comfortable and receiving pleasure, as Joseph explains, "Communication throughout is really important. Not just for reasons of consent, but also making sure you're giving your partner pleasure like, asking them 'do you like this? Do you want me to change something?'" Luca explained safe sex similarly, "If I am listening for when my partner feels uncomfortable, that is safe sex. When I tell my partner that I am uncomfortable, that is safe sex… Everyone's in the know to what's happening…"

For these young adults, safe sex is a constant conversation throughout an encounter, ensuring that agreement is kept and met. And while most respondents referred to the use of contraceptive devices, use of a contraceptive device was not necessary for sex to be safe. Supporting the idea of a condom-trust discourse from Robinson's (2018) study, many interviewees discussed a point in their sexual relationships in which trust outweighed the perception of risk during sex. Even without a protective method against STIs, this sex was still considered to be safe sex because the partnership had discussed their decision to cease condom use in open dialogue and had reached a certain level of relational trust. Pearl (queer woman) situates condom use in dialogue and trust, "I think, ideally, I would not feel like I had to use a condom with someone because we had already had the talk about tests and either like, gone and gotten tested together or just shown each other test results and already had that level of trust built."

Having had the discussion of birth control and testing with a partner, Joseph describes a similar decision process that also involves the length of a relationship, "If I was dating someone for a while, and they were on birth control, we usually don't use a condom after like a certain amount of time… If they do [know their testing status] and they feel comfortable not using a condom, then we'll not use a condom."

Time and practice of safe sex increases trust in these sexual relationships. When the sex is consensual, comfortable, and mutually informed, it is defined as safe for these respondents. As queerness expands what sex is, especially from an action to a feeling of intimacy, so too must notions of sexual safety expand out of necessity. Notably, respondents did not discuss risk management methods for their queer relationships, as queer sexual safety is rarely taught. Without queer safe sex knowledge or communication skills being taught in sex education settings, queer partners are creating this safety knowledge together in dialogue.

Sex Knowledge and Heteronormativity

In discussing their experiences with sexual education, it became clear that young people are receiving very different sex knowledge from educational institutions. Some respondents had not received a course at all, while others had received multiple years of sex education either in person, online, or outside of school with organizations like *Our Whole Lives*, a comprehensive sexual education course offered in secular and faith-based settings. With the variability of education and personal needs, respondents voiced limitations in their sexual education. Respondents discussed multiple themes of sex knowledge that were missing from their education which would have been useful and important to them before becoming sexually active. Sex education lacks 'real life' knowledge about the mechanics, the *how*, of sexual encounters, both heterosexual and queer, while reinforcing penetration as sex. Sex knowledge surrounding relationships was also lacking, especially regarding how to recognize unhealthy dynamics and non-consensuality, how to set boundaries and communicate with a partner, and how to approach pleasure.

When asked what information her sex

education lacked, Alice (cisgender female) responded, "General information about like, what is sex and how sex happens? That kind of thing would have been better to receive instead of having to figure it out on my own." Alice instead used online platforms to learn these mechanics or learned them in real time with her partner. A sense of loneliness in learning how to perform sex became apparent among many respondents. Jess reported lacking other practical information and highlighted that the information they received excluded queerness, "How do you get an STI? Like, what should I do after sex? Like, what [does] sex look like for like queer people?" Jess reported lacking sex information generally, such as the recommendation to pee after vaginal penetration to avoid an UTI, but emphasized that their sexual education had totally omitted queerness. Their and others' education was set around heterosexual sex and relationships, which emphasized the idea that sex is only penetration. Anal penetration was discussed in sex education for several respondents, but this reifies penetration as sex, as well as centers the male gay experience in queer sex discourse. Queer sex acts that did not include penetration were not discussed.

Consent was missing from many respondents' sex education in a way that led to non-consensual, risky sexual encounters. Quinn describes the way that sex education's exclusion of information regarding consent harmed them:

> So, I think my big consent learning curve was coming to [university] with that [sex ed class] where it's, like, consent should not be coercive. Or, like, being under the influence of stuff affects consent. And I was, like, a little bit of a troubled teen and I was doing, like, a lot of drugs… I don't know, I was in, like, not really consensual situations in terms of sex. So it would have been nice to know about the risks there. And also with like coercion, I guess, not really knowing… coercion not being consent essentially.

Consent has many dimensions and factors, requiring communication skills to execute and a great deal of knowledge to use practically.

Without that practical knowledge, young adults may find themselves in dangerous situations. Communication skills are necessary in consent but also in sexual relationships at large. Social stigma affects young adults' ability to communicate about sex, sexual safety, and consent. Pearl describes that she would have benefited from communication skills being taught as an aspect of sexual education, maintaining, "I wish I had had more of the knowledge to be able to communicate and to even know what was pleasurable for me." Percy pointed out that a lack of communication skills prevented them from setting boundaries during sex, as sexual communication had not been taught in sex ed or demonstrated accurately in media:

> I realized how that has shown up in my sex life and how I don't tell my partner, like, when things are uncomfortable or like… no one ever really told me, like, how to do that communication… That's what I wanted to know about: how to communicate during sex. Because in movies, no one talks to each other, ever. Even in porn, they're never like, "Hey, could you try this?" Maybe if you find really good porn. But it's just like the basics of like, you need to always be communicating, like sex should be a conversation.

Dialogue is inherent to the sex these young adults are having, yet how to communicate is not taught or visible in popular culture.

While many of these young adults reported learning the *how* of sex themselves and practicing communication and consent, they still lacked knowledge surrounding a key element of sexuality: pleasure. Exploration, with and without a partner, was the avenue for developing knowledge of pleasure for many respondents. Even so, stigmatization of masturbation and promotion of heteronormativity slowed this process. Percy argued that even without being given practical *how* knowledge, destigmatizing exploration would allow for people to have more pleasurable sex, especially queer people:

> You are kind of thrown in the deep end as a queer person with like, what does

your body do? If you get people from a young age to be more comfortable exploring their bodies, you don't have to spell things out because then people would be more free to experiment and feel like they can try things. I don't think I needed like, step-by-step directions from someone of how to do gay sex, but just being like, sex does not have to look like what just straight sex is.

Heteronormativity as an obstacle to learning all that sex could be and reciprocal pleasure was a concern for Pearl as well. She voiced that her education had presented a simplistic and inaccurate method for pleasure that centered around vaginal penetration, "I think the biggest lack for me was knowledge around my pleasure zones. And having sex be defined as something more than just like, a guy gets aroused and then puts his penis in a vagina, and then they orgasm and then done." This penetration model is both an inaccurate and unattainable representation of pleasure.

Current sex education fails to meet young adults' needs for consensual, queer-informed, pleasurable sex. Without the language to advocate for themselves or the comfort to communicate, young adults are left in a lonely position. This ultimately points to the need for teaching open dialogue in sex education, so that young adults have the dialogue skills to voice their sexual needs. Further, heteronormative teaching forces young queer people to wade through the trenches of sexual learning without guidance while stigma denies the validity of pleasure exploration as learning. Yet, young adults are redefining sex and sexual safety for themselves, and one important aspect of this is making choices around contraception.

Contraceptive Choices

In addition to the eight semi-structured interviews, the data from this section utilizes the responses of 75 young adults to create a more holistic understanding of how young people are making contraceptive choices and what contraceptives they are using. Survey respondents were not asked if they identified as queer overall, yet 24 self-reported their gender identity as queer.

From the surveys, respondents made contraceptive choices based on the following factors in order of importance, often with more than one factor involved: avoid pregnancy (20), avoid infection (12), regulate menstruation (12), regulate hormones (10), affordability (5), longevity of option use (5), decrease anxiety around sex (3), avoid the pain of IUD insertion (3), because of relationship type, to avoid the side effects of hormonal birth control, because the type was the only available to their assigned gender at birth. A breakdown of respondents' contraceptive device choices is found in Figure 1. Both multiple selection and write-in responses were recorded.

Queerness and relationship type were important factors and presented as notable findings that support earlier literature on the subversiveness of lesbian sex and heightened risk of STI transmission among queer femme people (Power, McNair, Carr 2009; Kaestle and Waller 2021). Another theme of decision-making was choosing the lesser of evils, crossing off contraceptive options from worst to most bearable.

Several survey respondents reported making their contraceptive decisions through the lens of their specific relationship needs, especially through a dialogue with their partner. This included the condom-trust discourse discussed above in 'safe sex: dialogue and trust,' although some survey respondents continued to use condoms with their long-term partners to avoid hormone disruption with other female birth control methods, such as the pill. Male condoms were the most common contraceptive option utilized, accounting for 51 users between the interviews and the survey.

Queerness developed as a complicated relationship factor in contraceptive choice. When asked to define safe sex, Percy first brought up the importance of a protective method but then explained that his queer relationship has no need for protection, "I mean, my initial thought is like, use protection but also like, I'm in a relationship right now that I don't need to use protection. So, I feel like that's not always the thing depending on just like, biology things." Together, he and his

partner hold no risk for pregnancy, making their shared perception of risk from sex low. The two do not use dental dams together. Quinn reported they also do not use dental dams with feminine partners but do use male condoms, for both fertility and STI avoidance, with masculine partners, "If working with a penis, condoms. I take birth control every day. I don't use dental dams." Two survey respondents, when asked what type of contraception they use, named their queer or lesbian relationship as the contraception: "I am a cis woman dating another cis woman, so I don't need contraception" and "Dating another woman."

I note the limitation of the term 'contraception' in both the interviews and surveys. The word is most often associated with avoiding pregnancy, although its intended use was to reference any and all risk reduction methods for avoiding pregnancy or STI infection during sexual activity. Unintentionally, this word choice may have marginalized and separated dental dams because their purpose is not associated with fertility. All the same, it is striking to find that not one of the 83 young adult respondents used or had used dental dams. Interviewees reported using male

condoms for penetration but never during fellatio. Comparing this non-use of dental dams to high use of male condoms supports the centrality of penetration as sex and the subversiveness of lesbian and queer sex. In discussing their sexual education history, only 2 interviewees had been shown a dental dam during a sex education but had not been shown how to use them. Dental dams are invisible in comparison to male condoms, which are accessible and visible, especially on college campuses, free for the taking and in high supply. Queer risk management methods, like using a dental dam to avoid infection, are not taught and therefore made invisible and rare, excluded from safe sex discourse. In turn, infection becomes a silent and unequal burden upon queer young adults.

Fear was a common emotion among interviewees when discussing contraceptives, especially the process of choosing which contraceptive methods would not work for them or their partnership. Quinn and Jess expressed they had heard 'horror stories' about the pain of IUD insertion and that this was an active part of their decision process. Jess and Alice discussed their fear of hormone dysregulation and adverse side effects with

What type of contraception/birth control method(s) do you use? Select all that apply
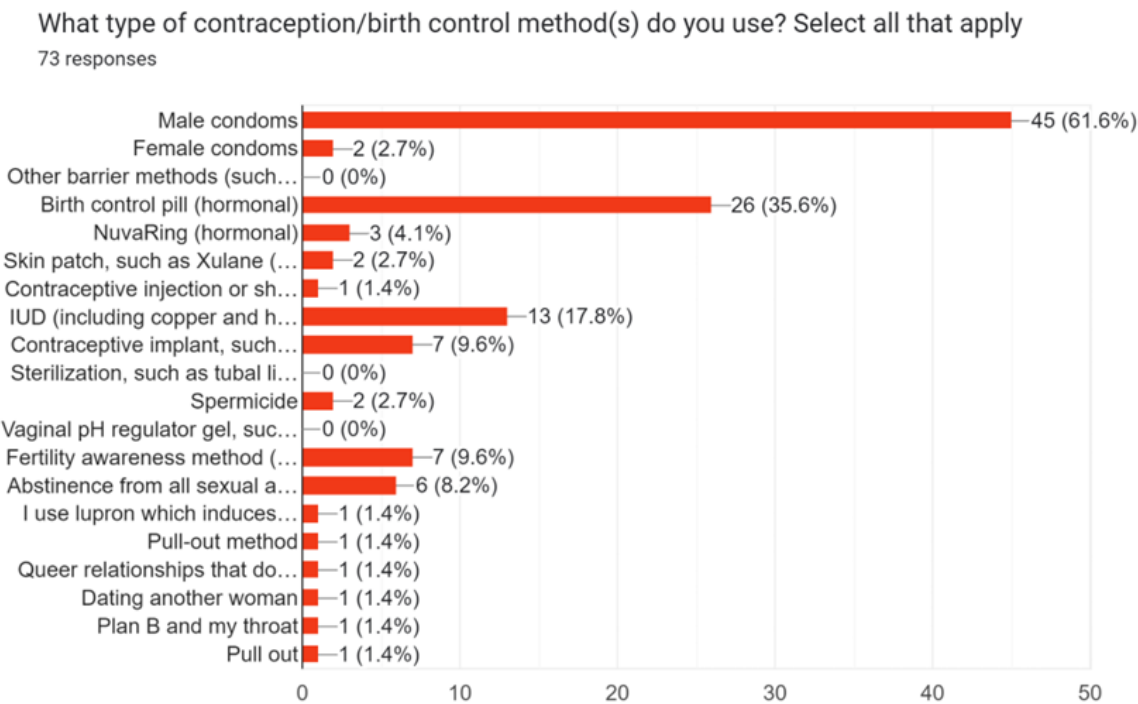73 responses

Figure 1. A table of showing respondents' previously and currently used contraceptive devices, either selected from a list or written in by the respondent. Table created by Thea Roland, "Contraceptive Device Survey Results," February 2023, Towson, MD.

options like the pill and hormonal IUDs. Jess described a fear of weight gain among their high school friends "not wanting to gain weight was more important than having a method of practicing safe sex." Options become limited as fears and unbearable consequences of use pile up; this is especially true for people assigned male at birth. Freddie (cisgender male) described his limited options paired with the ease of finding condoms, "So condoms just seemed like the easiest to get. And I can't always, like, know if my partner wants to be on birth control or anything like that. And sometimes they don't... And then things like spermicide, it's just not good for you... it's, like, don't want to branch to that." The contraceptive choices and communication of his partners affect his own choices, further complicating the process. Having limited options based on gender and relationship needs, young adults are not making contraceptive decisions based on what is available to them or viable for them.

Conclusions

As I consider how to demystify and destigmatize sex for future generations, it is crucial to incorporate the wide and subjective world of queer sexuality in teaching and discourse. High STI infection and low risk management use among queer femmes, as reflected in the interview and survey data, may be one effect of marginalizing these identities in teaching and discourse. Without practical knowledge or queer knowledge in sex education, young adults shape their own notions of sexual safety through the contexts of their relationships. Dialogue is a powerful tool for these young adults to redefine sexuality and sexual safety to meet their own needs, a power that can also enlighten the vast horizon of possibility of human sexuality.

In previous work in discourse theory and symbolic interactionism, sexual scripts have relied upon dominant cultural norms around gender and sexuality to analyze sexual decision-making. "Queering the dialogue" problematizes the legitimacy of these scripts as queer young adults dismantle cultural norms of gender and sex with their own identities and sexualities. Without a clear and concise 'universal objective'

of sex to default to in their sex lives, young adults are changing and creating their own subjective truths of sex through dialogue. Moreover, queering the dialogue seems to extend beyond queer young adults to heterosexual young adults, who, too, negotiate partnership sexuality and safety dialogically. I add to discourse theory by highlighting condom-trust discourse and the dialogical negotiation of risk and intimacy. Further, the invisibility of queer discourse and high visibility of heterosexual discourse demonstrates a gap in acknowledgement and understanding of queer sexuality that sociological research should remedy. These concepts are important not only to sociological considerations but also to public health and education.

Public health policy can alleviate the burden of STI infection among queer people by including queer sexual safety methods such as dental dams in sexual education, demonstrating their use practically, and making dental dams as widely available as male condoms. However, dams are not perfect tools. Current prevention methods available do not consider the practical needs of queer partners and their actual sexual activity. To truly meet the sexual needs of queer people, innovation is required to create new STI prevention methods for specific sex acts such as cunnilingus. Education policy should be concerned with isolating already marginalized, queer identities by excluding queer discourse. In the past two decades, political conservatism in the U.S. has increasingly limited educational institutions' ability to address queerness and sexuality, both through local and national censorship campaigns (Kadziolka 2025). This targeting of sexual education will leave many young people without access to any sexual health knowledge. Worse yet, it will further isolate groups already vulnerable to depression and suicide, such as young transgender people (Wolford-Clevenger et al. 2017). Queer children will become sexually active queer adults, whether or not they receive comprehensive sex ed. Of this there is no doubt. We can support their sexual safety and development by offering comprehensive, queer-inclusive, and dialogue-based skill-building sex education in schools.

This study was limited in scope in that all respondents were university students from the

same, predominantly white institution, although not all respondents to this study are white. Future studies on queer sexuality should also investigate non-students, a variety of geographical areas, a more diverse sampling by racial-ethnic group, and religious affiliation to widen understanding on the complexity of sexual learning and decision making. García (2009) demonstrates that ethnicity and racism play roles in sexual education that harm young people and limit their knowledge of sexual safety. Future research should consider how race/ethnicity and racist stereotyping interact with sexual learning, decision-making, and queerness. The work of Cook and Wynn (2021) highlights a gap in understanding interactions between safe sex practices and drug use, drinking, and party culture. Young adult respondents had many questions about how consent is negotiated when drug use is involved (Cook and Wynn 2021). What is exceptionally clear is that consent is multidimensional, each dimension of which should be explored and better understood. All the same, this study offers insight into queer sexuality and uplifts queer voices that have been seriously lacking in the sociology of sexuality. The dialogical exploration of sexual relationships young adults are undertaking instills a hope in me for a better, safer future for all of us.

Acknowledgements

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To Remain or to Return: The Role of Gender, Family Structures, and Uncertainty in Contemporary Kyrgyz-Russian Labour Migration

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how labour migration flows between Kyrgyzstan and Russia influence Kyrgyz family structures, gender norms and perceptions of uncertainty. I investigate the consequences for Kyrgyz society of mothers leaving their children behind to work abroad, of men returning from Russia to find new ways to maintain their roles as sole providers of the family, and the societal stigma faced by women who migrate for economic reasons. These topics are drawn from my ethnographic research conducted in August of 2023 with migrant workers and specialists working at international development organisations in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The primary goal of this study is to investigate Kyrgyz labour migration patterns in order to better understand how fear and aspirations towards leaving the home country and returning are justified and pursued, particularly in light of the added uncertainties stemming from forced mobilisations currently targeting Central Asians (and specifically Kyrgyz) in Russia.

It is lunchtime in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Feeling hot from the August sun, I enter a traditional Kyrgyz restaurant to meet up with my friend and her family. As I sit down at the table, Zhyldyz, with whom I had scheduled an interview, joins us. Zhyldyz is a waitress at the restaurant and has been working there ever since her return from Moscow in 2022. She also happens to be a relative of my friend. After catching up for a bit, Azamat, the other waiter, brings us our food. We eat and continue our casual conversation. "How was life in Russia like?" I ask Zhyldyz. "The first month was the hardest. I cried during the nights; I missed my children. I called them and my mom on WhatsApp, but since she lives in the mountains, the internet kept cutting off. I also noticed how tight a community of Uzbeks formed in Russia. I rarely saw my folks treat each other as kindly."

We exchange more words, and my friend pours us all more tea. I ask Zhyldyz what made her want to return. "When my daughter turned seven and was about to enter school, I decided to move back to Kyrgyzstan. My mother was getting old. Of course, I wanted to be close to my family. The pay in Moscow was good, yes, but the city was grey and there was rarely time for anything other than work. I like the mountains and the nature, the quiet living." Zhyldyz calls over the other waiter, Azamat, who joins us at the table. He is slightly younger than Zhyldyz, in his mid-20s. "Azamat also has a story to share about his time working in Moscow," Zhyldyz tells me. I ask him to tell us more. After describing in length how hard it was to secure a job without Russian citizenship, he tells me about a conversation he once had with a rich Muscovite:

> At the fancy restaurant I worked in Moscow, customers often left me generous tips, sometimes around 500 rubles for just a coffee. Since I had a hobby of collecting watches, I'd often compliment the watches our customers wore. I remember one instance when a customer handed me his Rolex to wear. I later found out it was worth 10 million rubles. He told me, 'Azamat, keep it on your wrist for a while. Maybe one day, you'll own something like this once you've started your own business.' We had a long conversation, but after I realised the value of that watch, I got scared and gave it back. I think these types of interactions really inspired me. Moscow is a busy city, but it offered me a lot of potential for growth. I liked how you could get any service quickly and everything was more technologically advanced. Social life was good there, and you weren't spending ridiculous money on family gatherings like you would in Kyrgyzstan. In the end, I had to return to Kyrgyzstan because of the military mobilization in Russia that started that year. But I think that although I liked Moscow, if I were to only listen to my soul's desires, I would not live there my whole life.

Labour migration — the process of movement across and within state borders for the purpose of employment (International Organization for Migration [IOM] 2019) — presents both unique opportunities for migrants and unknown outcomes. In Kyrgyzstan, cross-border labour migration has become an ingrained part of society, shaping individual life courses and family dynamics. According to recent data, every fourth household in the country has at least one labour migrant working abroad and sending remittances back home (United Nations 2022). Most of these workers, up to 85 percent, migrate to large cities in the Russian Federation, driven by economic factors such as higher wages and better career prospects (IOM 2021a).

These motivations align well with neoclassical migration theory, which views migration as a rational economic decision to maximise income while minimising costs (Massey et al. 1998). However, while economic incentives remain significant, migration

decisions are also shaped by a combination of fears, societal traditions, and state policies. The longstanding relationship between Kyrgyzstan and Russia under the Soviet Union has created enduring economic and linguistic ties that continue to facilitate migration flows between the two countries. However, the war in Ukraine has disrupted this strategy of movement, with many male workers now deciding to return to Kyrgyzstan or relocate to other countries to avoid military conscription. Decisions to migrate are, therefore, more complex than what neoclassical economics theory would teach us. They have to do with fear, tradition, and what my discussion with Zhyldyz and Azamat reveals — gender norms.

The stories told by my interlocutors helped me understand and decipher the ways in which labour migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia impacts family dynamics and gender norms in modern-day Kyrgyzstan. In addition to the gendered aspects of migrating to Russia, uncertainty emerges as another important theme throughout this paper. Defined as a condition where "knowledge about the future is unknown, even when the possible outcomes are known," uncertainty permeates the migration process and shows itself in new forms depending on the stage of the migrant's departure (Stirling 2010, 1029). For women, the uncertainty associated with leaving their families to seek economic opportunities abroad is often compounded by societal assumptions such as the perceived promiscuity of female labour migrants working in Russia. In contrast, I observed that, for male migrants, these feelings of uncertainty stemmed from more material concerns such as securing decent work, avoiding the Russian blacklist because of insufficient work documents, or, more recently, ending up being forcibly mobilized to the frontlines in Ukraine by the Russian government. Coming back home or moving elsewhere appear to be the only safe options left for Kyrgyz male workers in Russia, revealing emerging uncertainties over the stability of the sole provider role within the family unit.

Through my ethnographic research conducted in August of 2023 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, I aim to capture the everyday realities of men and women navigating this uncertain terrain. My fluency in Russian enabled me to conduct in-depth interviews with locals and build meaningful connections without language barriers. However, I remained mindful of my position as a half-Russian researcher in Central Asia and acknowledged that relying on English and Russian for communication may have limited my grasp of certain nuances apparent in the Kyrgyz language. Having previously travelled to Kyrgyzstan to visit my friend's family and explore the country, I was already familiar with the environment and the social context in which I conducted my interviews and participant observations.

This research is further enriched by the perspectives of international development specialists introduced to me by my friend's family. Their insights provide a multifaceted view of the current dynamics between development policy and the emerging challenges faced by migrant workers in Russia. At the heart of this paper are the stories of labour migrants — their experiences living abroad, their justifications for returning, and their perspectives on migration. By incorporating the uncertainty migrants face into the analysis of labour migration to and from Kyrgyzstan, this work aims to contribute to the academic discourse on migration. It also offers a snapshot of the precarious livelihoods of many Kyrgyz families dependent on Russia. Ultimately, this paper invites readers to view migration through a lens that recognises the inherent inequalities of cross-border movement and the resilience of those who confront them.

Context

There is much to say about the role that labour migration plays in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the role of women within these migratory processes. Kyrgyzstan ranks among the top recipients of remittance flows in the world, with a substantial portion of its GDP — nearly 30% — derived from money sent home by migrants (World Food Programme [WFP] 2021). Since much of this migratory and financial flow is undocumented, Kyrgyz economic dependency on remittances is hard to track and could, therefore, be much higher than what official

sources estimate (International Federation for Human Rights [IFHR] 2016). The reasons for such a large population of labour migrants being undocumented stem from the administrative bureaucracies and high costs of obtaining legal migrant worker status in countries of arrival (Reeves 2013a). Kyrgyz dependency on remittance money is, however, not purely a financial aspect; it is a deeply ingrained tool of livelihood for many families. Such dependency raises critical questions about household dynamics, family planning, and the power imbalances stemming from economic, social, and political reliance on another country.

The most significant 'push factor' — the development specialists' term for migration out of Kyrgyzstan — is the lack of employment opportunities at home (WFP 2021). Most of these migrants, predominantly male, seek work in Russia. The reasons for widespread flows to Russia stem from the shared Soviet history, the prevalence of the Russian language, widely spoken in Bishkek, and the visa-free entry. To better contextualise the current migratory dependency between these two countries, it is important to shed light on the history of long-standing nomadic traditions of the Kyrgyz people and the later shift towards collectivisation under Soviet rule. What followed was a strategic movement of families and labour power within the USSR from more densely populated areas to the "unpopulated" regions of Central Asia with the purpose of agricultural reform through the establishment of *kolkhozes*, or collective farms (Chari and Verdery 2009). With this shift to collectivisation, the conceptualisation of what 'productivity' meant within Soviet Kyrgyzstan also changed, presenting Kyrgyz women with both new rights and new expectations. The following historical context and literature review provide a framework for dissecting my fieldwork observations.

From pastoralism to Soviet settlements

When examining migration in Kyrgyzstan through a historical lens, the way of life for families to maintain constant motion and to persist through times of uncertainty becomes evident. The earliest Kyrgyz population, Turkic nomads, traditionally practised transhuman pastoralism, herding sheep, goats, and horses, and relocating with seasonal shifts between yurt camps (Golden 2011). The challenges posed by these constant environmental changes led many such pastoralist societies to adapt innovatively to life's uncertainties (Scoones 2023). However, with Tsarist Russia's imperial conquests over the Central Asian region in the 19th century, these reflexive nomadic traditions became slowly endangered with the agricultural practices promoted by the Russian settlers (Thomas 2018). Under the later Soviet regime, Russian ethnographic fieldwork played a crucial role in the territorial delineation of Kyrgyzstan (Thomas 2018), which led to the formation of national territories and the establishment of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic (Kyrgyz SSR) in 1936.

Through Soviet centralisation policies like *korenizatsiia*, which appointed non-Russian nationals in government roles (Thomas 2018), the Kyrgyz SSR, along with other Central Asian states and the Russian oblasts, was built to remain politically dependent on Moscow. This dependence on Russia is still evident today, with large Soviet-era energy structures and political statues prominent in Kyrgyz urban landscapes. However, the ethnic Russian population in Kyrgyzstan, once constituting as much as 30% in 1959 (Baimatov 2014), has significantly decreased to around 5% by 2022 (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic [NSC] 2023). The substantial presence of Russians during the Soviet era was driven by infrastructure projects and the labour demands for operating machinery. Russians have had a longstanding presence in Central Asia, historically enjoying a higher quality of life compared to the Central Asian populations in Russia (Baimatov 2014). The remittance dependency of Kyrgyzstan on the contemporary Russian Federation stems from the nation-building strategies of both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. The migratory movements of today are therefore influenced by centralised economic and political planning of an interdependent union built around Moscow.

Implications on gender

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the

ensuing rapid shifts towards privatised modes of labour prompted a rise in unemployment in Kyrgyzstan, turning the decision to migrate in search of better incomes into a necessary life strategy for many families (Abazov 1999). These migration patterns from Central Asia to Russia were partly prevalent during Soviet times, with certain industry specialists, such as apricot farmers, migrating to cities in Russia in the summer to sell their seasonal produce (Reeves, 2013b). However, the fall of the union meant that many new financial uncertainties, as well as gender divisions within the household, became more prominent. The following waves of male emigration to Russia in search of better job opportunities left a rift between husbands abroad and wives at home, especially during a time of inevitable reassessment of Kyrgyz national values and national identity after the Soviet era (Khitarishvili 2016). During the Soviet Union, women's rights in Kyrgyzstan significantly developed as the ideal Soviet citizen did not hold gender as an obstacle to productive participation in the paid workforce. However, since motherhood was simultaneously taught to be a woman's socialist duty to the Soviet state, Kyrgyz women were now seen as tied to both the compounds of the workplace and home (Kamp 2016).

Societal changes after the fall of the Soviet Union have notably altered family dynamics in Kyrgyzstan. With a rising number of men now migrating for work, many women continue to take on dual roles, managing both household responsibilities and economic activities (Schmidt and Sagynbekova 2008). However, in comparison to other Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan demonstrates a growing number of female migrants, with nearly 40% of Kyrgyz migrants in Russia being women in 2016 (FIDH 2016). Most migrating women take up positions in services, catering, textile production, and domestic work in private homes (FIDH 2016). The impact of female labour migration extends beyond immediate economic benefits; it has implications for wider shifts in social structures, education, and women's empowerment.

Scholars of migration have shown that women who migrate for work gain new skills, a sense of independence, and a broader perspective, which they often bring back to their communities at home (King and Lulle 2016). However, this shift is not without its challenges. Female migrants frequently face job insecurities, exploitation, and difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities, both at home and abroad. Based on my interviews, women's emigration has predominantly been depicted in a shameful light, making it harder for women to justify their reasons to migrate in search of personal benefits. In such a way, female migrants face a double vulnerability based on both their gendered and migrant identity abroad (FIDH 2016).

The relationship between gender norms and migration experiences in Central Asia has been extensively studied by scholars such as Madeleine Reeves (2009; 2013a; 2013b; 2019) and Igor Rubinov (2014). Throughout this paper, I adopt Reeves's (2009) critically pragmatic ethnographic approach, which moves beyond economic determinism to consider the nuanced social, cultural, and familial factors influencing migration decisions. This framework aligns with my interlocutors' narratives, revealing the complex motivations behind their choices. While male migration experiences remain underexplored in development policy (Reeves, 2013b), I analyse both male and female perspectives to offer a balanced understanding of how both sexes navigate migration uncertainties. Reeves's (2013a; 2013b) work on borders and identity provides historical and theoretical context to the challenges faced by Kyrgyz migrants amidst war and anti-immigration rhetoric.

Rubinov (2014) highlights that remittances are not solely economic but deeply embedded in familial obligations, reflecting tensions between traditional expectations and financial independence. This is echoed by my interlocutors' experiences. Additionally, insights from development organisation specialists frame my analysis through Ulrich Beck's (1992) "risk society" and Zygmunt Bauman's (2013) "liquid modernity," which illuminate the precarity and adaptability migrants face today. These perspectives are addressed in the final section, where I explore future migration implications and changing notions of modernity. Thus, my work compares existing literature on female agency with the stories of

my interlocutors, Aiyimgul, Zhyldyz, and Bermet, emphasising their voices and how they add to this scholarship.

Figure 1: Monday, 21st of August, 1pm Center for Employment of Citizens Abroad. Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Author's drawing.

Departure

The above is a doodle I made in my fieldwork notebook during my visit to the Center for Employment of Citizens Abroad. The atmosphere was busy but surprisingly mundane: a dimly lit lobby filled with young couples, older women, and many young men, all seated on old leather couches, waiting for their appointments. Some older women appeared visibly annoyed by the long wait, while most young men were sat mindlessly scrolling their smartphones, looking as if they knew from experience exactly how much longer they would have to wait. It was lunchtime, and I found myself wondering about all the intricate reasons for people of all ages to come here on a weekday to sit bunched up together patiently for who knows how long. I hoped we would not have to wait until dinner time.

I was also here waiting for my meeting with Arslan, the Head of the Center for Employment of Citizens Abroad, who had kindly agreed to meet with me for an interview. After waiting for around 40 minutes, I was finally let into the office to talk with him. "Our primary purpose here is to enable our citizens to work abroad safely and to inform them of their rights, following the guidelines set forth by the Ministry of Labour, Social Security, and Migration of the Kyrgyz Republic," Arslan explained to me in a formal manner.

> We're currently following government guidelines aimed at stabilising migration. While we continue to assist citizens in relocating abroad for work, we are also exploring new strategies to attract them back to their homeland (на родину). We promote information about sectors in our country needing more manpower. However, many people still prefer to leave, often to the US or Europe, instead of Russia. Recently, there's been a surge in interest for seasonal work on strawberry fields in the UK, likely due to higher pay and work stability. Our citizens in Russia often express safety concerns, which is less common among those in Europe.

After discussing at length the countries where Kyrgyz labour migrants are currently settling, I asked Arslan about his views on return migration. "Why do some people decide to return?" I asked. "Well, there aren't many who do, but those who return bring in new ideas and innovation, which is what we really need here," he said, taking out his phone, "Let me show you. This is my friend Almaz. He returned to his hometown last year and started a strawberry farm using tips he learned from English farmers — the right soil types, irrigation systems, and so on. And he's doing very well now!" Arslan showed me a few pictures on his Instagram profile of Almaz working on his land.

"This kind of motivation is what Kyrgyzstan needs. Unfortunately, while many dream of developing our nation, once they find work opportunities abroad, they often choose not to return. And I can understand why."

This excerpt from my hour-long interview with Arslan illustrates the complex migration patterns and ambitions of many Kyrgyz labour migrants. Arslan's words reflected the local imaginaries of a life beyond Bishkek: stable, better paid, and "modern." These imaginaries did not surprise me since I had repeatedly stumbled upon them in conversations with taxi drivers, beauty salon workers, and during long dinner conversations with my friend and her family. One salon worker, with no immediate plans to leave, still aspired to move out of Kyrgyzstan some day, "Of course I would, that's the dream. The economy is going down here. Many of my friends have already left," she answered when I asked whether she would ever like to live abroad.

What surprised me was the persistence of this narrative of stability offered by emigration, considering the recent destabilisation of migrant workers' lives in Russia. Despite the rising threats of police brutality, forced deportations and many other dangers that Central Asian migrant workers now face in Russia (Institute for War and Peace Reporting [IWPR] 2023), migration from Kyrgyzstan seemed to be widely viewed as the logical next step towards enhancing one's quality of life. Yet, this shared sentiment seemed to be at odds with the new government policies mentioned by Arslan, which aim to stabilise migration processes. As Bermet from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) later explained to me, this policy is designed to discourage emigration and instead encourage people to "choose Kyrgyzstan first." The dichotomy between the government's efforts to contain migratory movement at a time of uncertainty and the ruling desire of many individuals to continue emigrating highlighted a complex paradox at the heart of contemporary Kyrgyz society.

The prevailing economic uncertainties were often used by my interlocutors as a springboard into discussing other types of uncertainties of everyday lives in Kyrgyzstan. "We have

corruption here at a genetic level," a taxi driver told me, "And it's expensive to live in Bishkek, people spend so much money here on unnecessary things. I spent so much less when living in *Kazan* [Russia]. I liked that I didn't have to think about buying gifts for every single occasion when a relative had a baby back home. I could just focus on myself and not have to attend all these *tois* [traditional Kyrgyz festivities] by being in Russia."

This comment on *tois* reminded me of the previous conversation I had with Azamat, the waiter who had worked in Russia, who expressed similar feelings of relief from family obligations in the form of social spending. As discussed by Rubinov (2014, 189) in his ethnography on Kyrgyz social reciprocity and obligations of remitting, gift-giving at Kyrgyz *tois* represents "the continuity of social proximity across households," even at times when the gift-giver is absent. Similar to Malinowski's (1922) study on the *kula ring* of Papua New Guinea, as well as other forms of obligatory reciprocity, *tois* provide a structured environment for giving and receiving gifts and exchanging information on family achievements. They also serve to demonstrate the continuity of wealth within families and their broader kinship networks (Rubinov 2014). The rise in remittances sent back to Kyrgyzstan has enabled this show of wealth to expand, giving rise to a habit of "keeping up with the others" for many households (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE] 2009, 53). What Azamat and the taxi driver were emphasising was the excessiveness of this show of wealth that *tois* had become. "So many couples take out loans nowadays to pay for their weddings. There are loan companies specifically designed for this. I know an ironic case where a couple got divorced shortly after their wedding because of the cycle of debt they ended up in after hosting their *toi*. I don't think I want to have a big wedding."

Based on these observations, leaving Kyrgyzstan to work abroad offered many young men a way to avoid a myriad of social obligations back home. Azamat's comment on not wanting to host a big wedding because of the high costs highlighted a shifting attitude shared by many younger Kyrgyz generations

against traditional wedding customs, with a growing shift towards financial independence. Similar notions were expressed by women: Zhyldyz, who had divorced her husband before moving to Moscow, echoed Azamat's words saying she too would not want to have a costly wedding ceremony. However, for some women, the opportunity to escape social obligations through migration is not simply a choice but rather a survival mechanism. "It's almost expected for a man to leave the kids and wife home to work abroad and send remittances for the whole community," Bermet explained:

> This is especially the case in rural villages. However, there are many stereotypes attached to women who migrate away from their hometowns. Their occupations abroad are constantly questioned and discussed by families and friends, and there is a lot of jealousy involved too. I've also found that often the reason women leave the country to work in Russia has to do with falling out with their husbands or mothers-in-law. So, it's not always a genuine desire to leave, but more of a push coming from inside their own communities.

My earlier conversation with Zhyldyz at the restaurant offers a good example of this push factor. Her divorce, primarily due to the challenges she faced as a *kelin* (a newlywed bride) living under the roof of her mother-in-law, led her to think that moving to Moscow was the only sensible option left. She felt compelled to leave and start anew, and she described her decision to depart by bus with around 500 Rubles in savings as "the only viable one at that moment." In this way, migration emerges not only as a way to escape social expectations but as a response to familial pressures and gendered dynamics that constrain women's agency.

Despite expectations for many *kelin* to conform to their husband's family's will, Bermet's comment and Zhyldyz's personal experience highlighted an unexpected form of agency: women using migration to reject familial expectations and escape societal pressures. The anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2000) explored how Bedouin women in North Africa, constrained by patriarchal structures,

use poetry as a subtle rebellion against these social hierarchies. Through poetry, they express grievances and challenge norms without directly confronting authority, thus exercising impactful agency. While Kyrgyz women may not use poetry, migration becomes their rebellion — a conscious choice to step outside restrictive familial roles. Zhyldyz's decision to migrate to Moscow after her divorce reflects this agency. Unable to endure her role as a *kelin* under her mother-in-law's scrutiny, migration offered Zhyldyz a chance to escape oppressive dynamics and reclaim independence. This mirrors Abu-Lughod's (2000) argument: agency does not always take the form of explicit resistance but emerges through everyday actions that disrupt expectations. The pressures on *kelins* to manage the household, defer to elders, and uphold reputations leave little room for individuality (Childress 2017; Isabaeva 2014). As Thieme (2008) notes, the absence of husbands due to labour migration exacerbates these dynamics and leaves kelins vulnerable to exploitation. In this context, migration becomes an act of defiance, as women like Zhyldyz break free from narrow gender roles. It is not just a survival strategy but a means of reclaiming agency and escaping familial pressures, much like Bedouin poetry. By drawing on Abu-Lughod's (2000) insights, we see Kyrgyz women's migration challenges narratives of passivity, showing how women in constrained environments find ways to exercise agency — whether through poetry or movement across borders.

These discussions highlight the gendered nuances of decision-making before departure and underscore a generational and socioeconomic shift in aspirations. This evolving mindset is reflected in Aliya Shagieva's painting "Dreams of Paris" (Figure 2), which I saw at her exhibition at the Kyrgyz National Museum of Fine Arts. The painting depicts an elderly woman confined by traditional domestic roles, metaphorically representing societal expectations that many young Kyrgyz, such as Zhyldyz and Azamat, are challenging. As Billur Gungoren (2004) notes, younger generations in Kyrgyzstan are increasingly adopting Western values centred around personal fulfilment and individualisation. This generational divide became even more apparent during a

conversation about wedding traditions with my friend's grandmother. She nostalgically recalled her own big wedding and that of her daughter, to which my friend responded that her mother did not know many of her wedding guests. This moment highlighted the growing questioning and rejection of long-held traditions by Kyrgyzstan's younger generation. The "Dreams of Paris" painting subtly questions the unspoken aspirations of women, particularly in the context of migration and marriage. It symbolises a broader transformation within Kyrgyz society, where migration is increasingly seen not merely as a quest for economic betterment but as a pursuit of personal independence and a modern identity. This shift marks a departure from the established norms and expectations of older generations. As Kyrgyzstan continues to navigate these changing tides, the stories of individuals like Zhyldyz, Azamat, and my friend's grandmother offer a vivid portrayal of a society in flux, wrestling with the complexities of tradition, modernity, and evolving interpretations of what it means to leave one's home.

Transit

Much like the critical departure stage of migration, the actual migrant experience of working and living in a host country comes with a set of its own unique challenges. These range from navigating unforeseen bureaucratic barriers and life circumstances to finding a sense of community, keeping in contact with the communities and family at home and establishing oneself as an individual beyond the identity tied to a specific geographical region or gender role (Verkuyten et al. 2019). In the case of Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia, the added challenge of facing structural racism against Central Asians presents concrete obstacles for societal integration. Therefore, the primary motivation of labour migrants to gain Russian citizenship is often ensuring the continuity and stability of their legal work status instead of fully immersing themselves in Russian society (Poletaev 2020).

Marsel, a 42-year-old chef working at and managing the restaurant I visited during my stay, told me his turbulent story of seeking such stability in Russia. Marsel migrated to Moscow

when he was 23 years old. He holds a degree in finance from back home, but he realised early on that working in Russia would enable him to make twice the money he was making as a worker at an oil company in Kyrgyzstan. "The only thought in my mind at that time was to make money and to move back home one day. I had a wife and baby back in Kyrgyzstan, and I had to provide for them," he told me. In Moscow, Marsel worked as a goods seller at the Cherkizovsky Market, the biggest marketplace in Europe at the time. "I worked there with other Kyrgyz folks, Uzbeks, and Tajiks. The winters were long and cold, so I thought to myself I better save my fingers from freezing. It took me a while but eventually I found another job through a leaflet, as a furniture assembler. Since I didn't hold a Russian passport, securing jobs was hard."

Marsel often changed jobs and flats during his stay in Russia. Without Russian citizenship, many of his jobs were illegal and paid in cash. His first flat, meant for three people, was shared with 15–20 other Kyrgyz workers. Azamat, another restaurant worker, also lived in an overcrowded flat designed for four people. Madeleine Reeves describes such living arrangements, common among Central Asians in Russia, as a "public secret" — widely known but unacknowledged by state surveys and invisible in national statistics (Reeves 2013b). These secret spaces of illegality translate into prolonged precariousness and marginalisation for many Central Asian migrants. This situation parallels undocumented Mexican migrants in the US or *sans papiers* in France, where othering facilitates exploitation (Fassin 2001). Marsel explained that he gathered information about jobs and labour rights through word-of-mouth from fellow Central Asians, often during metro rides or in public spaces. As a migrant in Russia, Marsel lived as an economically contributing public secret — constantly concealing his non-Russian citizenship, shifting from job to job, and remitting his earnings to his family back home.

Zhyldyz shared similar precarities she faced when finding jobs and trying to find a sense of belonging in Russia. She told me she had very limited money once she first arrived in Moscow, and she struggled to make ends meet. After

Figure 2: Aliya Shagieva, "Dreams of Paris," canvas 40x50 cm, oil paints. 2023. Photograph by author.

finding work at a clothing store, she realised that she was spending too much money on public transport. She soon started working simultaneously at a beauty salon next to her flat. Though she found the work environment and pay at the salon better, with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the salon had to shut down. Fortunately, around the same time, Zhyldyz found out about a Central Asian restaurant opening in the same centre. After an interview with the Kyrgyz woman who ran the place, she got a job as an accountant. "I was shocked, I had no experience in running numbers!" Zhyldyz told me with excitement, "It was a dream job. I learned to use the system and made around 100,000 Rubles a month, and that money was a huge motivator. But the work was tough, and there were times where I worked around the clock and couldn't see my children much. I was also working simultaneously at the salon after the pandemic ended."

Aiyimgul, a 56-year-old female return migrant with whom I had a phone call one late evening in Bishkek, shared with me her story of searching for jobs in the UK, where she lived and worked alone for six years. "I have a medical degree from Bishkek University, but the highest position I could work in the UK was as an elderly care worker, and even that took me a while to reach," she shared with me:

> It was difficult trying to find jobs in the UK without knowing English. I worked as a chambermaid for the first year, trying to make ends meet and send remittances to my husband and two daughters at home. Then I got a job as a chef, and later I worked in elderly care. I was surprised at how often people asked about my previous experience in these roles. 'I was a mom,' I always answered them, 'of course, I had plenty of experience.'

She told me this, smiling. We talked more about what it was like being a mother and working abroad. "I left when my daughters were just hitting puberty. I started sending my daughters new shirts, underwear, and bras by mail; they were embarrassed to ask their dad to buy them. It was very hard being a distant mom and

wife," Aiyimgul continued. "Many people gossiped about what I was doing in the UK. I think it was mostly jealousy. Our house was the first one in our neighborhood to get a washing machine, which I sent my husband the money for. All our neighbors apparently came over to see how it worked out of curiosity," she shared with me, laughing.

Contrasted with the more prevalent setting of men working abroad away from their children, Aiyimgul's perspective, although in a different regional context to my other interlocutors, sheds light on the nuanced challenges and gendered expectations that many female labour migrants must navigate when living alone in a foreign country. While Aiyimgul had full working rights in the UK, she too said she often felt like an intruder, someone other than the rest. This was also a reason for her return to Kyrgyzstan, in addition to rejoining her family. She told me she did not see herself as anything else than a "migrant" when she was working abroad. Aiyimgul's and Zhyldyz's stories also depicted an instance which diverged from typical understandings and perceptions of women in migration, historically and in many present cases in Kyrgyzstan, as a "secondary migrant," migrating with the sole purpose of creating or reuniting family (Pedraza 1991, 306). For Aiyimgul, going against the preconceived ideas of women as migrants and wives, and instead taking on the role of the, breadwinner resulted in a struggle to juggle the roles and expectations of being breadwinner, mother, wife, and daughter-in-law — a struggle shared by many middle-aged migrating Kyrgyz women (Thieme 2008). Her agency back home in regulating the use of the money she remitted to her husband, which was meant to be used for building a new house, was at times disregarded as the remittances were spent to buy additional items that she was sometimes unaware of despite being the main financial contributor of the household. The devaluation of her educational qualifications from back home further stripped down her agency and her feeling of "professional prestige," resulting in a contradictory case of socioeconomic mobility in the context of migration (Cruz 2012, 534). However, Aiyimgul's optimism and emphasis on her achievements despite the hardships she faced living alone in a

foreign country shed light on how migration is not purely a "vulnerability trope" set on women in migration but can be a source of considerable "material and personal empowerment" for older women (King and Lulle, 2016).

The experiences of Kyrgyz citizens in Russia, characterised by prolonged periods of life uncertainties stemming from brief moments of content upon securing stable employment and their quick disappearance shortly after, exemplify the implications of living in a "risk society." This concept, developed by sociologists Ulrich (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1998), is vividly illustrated by these modern fluctuating fortunes. As defined by Giddens (1992, 3), a risk society is "a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk." Economic dependency of Kyrgyzstan on Russia, for example, is a result of previous governmental and ideological decisions, which are now posing new risks, such as enabling a source of stable income for the resulting migrant population in Russia. Although living in a "risk society" might not be on the minds of Kyrgyz people going about their everyday lives, the accumulation of knowledge about potential outcomes for events such as the perks of gaining Russian citizenship or the dangers of ending up on the blacklist is exactly the type of anxious "reflexivity" which thinkers like Zygmunt Bauman (2013) point to when conceptualising our increasingly interconnected and informed world. As stated by Beck (1992, 21), "the concept of risk is directly bound to the concept of reflexive modernization."

"Many younger generations prefer not to seek higher education anymore," Bermet told me. "They would rather move abroad and make a much better living working in these unstable jobs. We've seen many instances where young people become content living this way, hopping from one contract to another with no health or pension plans in sight. This poses some serious questions for educational development in Kyrgyzstan." This insight made by Bermet offers a good example of how international development organisations grapple with emerging risks through reflexivity. The precarious nature of work that many younger generations are increasingly tied to is not unique to Central Asians in Russia. The shift of young people to work in "flexible" work settings with the cost of future stability is becoming a prominent phenomenon in the increasingly digitalised global economy (International Labour Organization [ILO] 2022). For example, in Japan, the rise of young irregular workers has led to new forms of insecurity, such as the phenomenon of "net café refugees"— a modern manifestation of homelessness (Allison 2012). Yet, for Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia, these challenges are compounded by the additional uncertainties of being undocumented workers in a country at war, making the future of work and family life even more unpredictable. In the following section, I delve into the decisions of Kyrgyz migrants to return and how they envision stable futures amidst the instability of the risk society they are currently grappling with.

Return

Having examined the reasons for initial migration and the experiences of labour migrants in Russia, I now turn to the final stage — returning home. Recently, many male workers in Russia have returned to Kyrgyzstan due to the threat of military mobilisation into the Russian Army. This safety threat, combined with the pressure from Kyrgyz families for young men to migrate for work, raises several questions. Arslan's vision of returning citizens bringing innovative ideas for economic development now seems uncertain. Would these returning male labour migrants settle in Kyrgyzstan? Will they have the financial capacity and creativity to do so, considering the limited work opportunities at home? Or will they seek new destinations, and if so, which countries will offer the same appeal that Russia once did?

These are some of the questions I asked my interlocutors while in Bishkek, as well as online. Through Facebook, I received interesting debates over reasons to return. Darhan, a middle-aged woman living in Kazakhstan, commented, "In my opinion, as people age, they all return to their homeland, to their native roots, even former presidents! Those who have millions! They ask to return home. With the new president, Kyrgyzstan is now changing for the

better. We hope that the youth will return with new knowledge and new ideas and will further elevate Kyrgyzstan in a positive direction!" Aijan, a young mother living in Moscow, replied simply, "I return every time only because of my parents. And I leave every time only because of the non-existent salary." Samat, a middle-aged male migrant living in Europe, replied:

> In the Kyrgyz Republic, unemployment is, I assume, the main reason why people leave the country and do not return. The standard of living and safety also play a significant role. Being in Europe right now, I've become used to the local driving culture and road safety. However, there is one huge advantage to one's homeland. It's the inexplicable

Figure 3: Exchange rates at a currency exchange office in Bishkek, 23rd of Aug, 11 am. The value of the Russian Ruble has fallen to equal that of the Kyrgyz som. Author's photography

feeling of home that only comes with age.

Considering that Samat's comment received the most likes and was brought to the top of the comments section, a desire to return home seemed to be a commonly shared sentiment, especially among older migrants abroad. Promoting this feeling of home was also the current strategy which development organisations and the Kyrgyz government aimed to implement. "The real reasons people choose to migrate are hard to track these days. It's becoming more about people mimicking each other than having a real need to leave. I think the process of return migration should work similarly to the process of leaving – returned family members should encourage migrants to return," Bermet told me when further explaining the policy of stabilising migration processes.

Indeed, many returned migrants I talked to were happy with their decisions to return. These were mostly the female return migrants, who expressed feelings of community and stability once back home. However, many of my male interlocutors expressed how hard it was to find proper work back home after not having pursued a higher education. "I'm working here at Dordoi Bazaar. I work from 5 am to 9 pm. I'm also working as a taxi driver. It's expensive to live in Bishkek. On a basic income like mine, affording to survive is hard work," a taxi driver who recently returned from Russia to avoid the mobilisation told me. Another taxi driver told me that many of his friends decided to stay in Russia despite the dangers of military conscriptions they faced there. "They all live in hopes of the situation changing, with hopes of Putin suddenly making peace with Ukraine and with the economy turning back to what it was. But I think this will go on for long, Putin has nothing else to do, and he is making money. This all has to do with money, and everything runs on money," he stated bleakly.

While many Central Asian men are now returning home to avoid conscription, growing numbers of Russian male citizens are simultaneously resettling in countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan for this very same reason. However, as Kyrgyz return migrants are

returning with very limited to non-existent savings and plans for the future, Russian emigrees or *relokanty* often hold some savings and some form of plan for relocation to a third point of entry through personal ties (Institute for International Political Studies [ISPI], 2023). The stark contrast and inequalities between Russians safely fleeing their homes and Central Asians precariously returning to theirs echoed in the taxi driver's observation on everything running on money. Even through my conversations with people in higher socioeconomic positions, I noticed how they were voicing their concerns over how returning to Kyrgyzstan was something they all wished to strive for one day, but only once the economy was better and more prosperous. Bermet went on to tell me:

> This is the dilemma we now face. People with high degrees of education leave and dream of one day returning to a more developed Kyrgyzstan. But no one is coming back to develop the country. And now the government is planning to bring in migrant workers from Pakistan to work in the agricultural sector, since our citizens don't want to do these low-paying but extremely vital jobs.

The contradicting flows of migration to and from Russia, and the institutional long-term dilemmas and risks, which Bermet emphasised were not necessarily prevalent in the minds of return migrants themselves. Rather, the "risks" such as economic depression, job precarity, and unemployment, which the Kyrgyz government and development bodies were discussing, translated in the minds of return migrants into feelings of uncertainty over one's future as a provider, a wife or a daughter.

> It was challenging to reintegrate into society back home after having lived in such a different one for so long. I still face difficulties relating to my now grown-up daughters and even my husband. My daughters now tell me that they wouldn't want their children to live far from them, which is hard for me to hear. I don't regret my decision of having worked abroad though.

Aiyimgul told me when I asked her how she felt returning to Kyrgyzstan after having worked in the UK for six years. "I knew I wanted to spend my retirement days in Kyrgyzstan though. Seeing how elderly people were treated in England was painful. I could never imagine being old and sick and not living under the same roof as my own family," she told me. After her return, Aiyimgul successfully started her own non-governmental organisation that translates international health policy recommendations from English to Russian and Kyrgyz for local citizens. "I've become more open as a person, and I always knew I wanted to come back home and share my new insights." Comparatively, Marsel told me that once he returned to Kyrgyzstan after being caught with no working license in Russia, he established his own restaurant chain in Bishkek with contacts he had gained in Moscow. He said that he wished to open a similar restaurant somewhere in Europe and to spread his love for Central Asian cuisine. These instances reminded me of the story of Almaz, who had started his own strawberry farm after returning, shared by Arslan at our initial meeting.

At a time of heightened anxieties — marked by war, inequalities faced in Russia, and the rise of return migration — Zygmunt Bauman's (2013) concept of liquid modernity provides a valuable lens through which to understand the adaptability of Kyrgyz migrants. Bauman (2013) asserts that modern life demands individual flexibility and constant adaptation in response to its inherent unpredictability. This fluidity is evident in the experiences of my interlocutors, who navigate precarious work settings, changing migration policies, and the loss of safety networks abroad, often at the cost of personal stability. For many of my interlocutors, migration serves not only as a survival strategy but also as a form of "knowledge acquisition" (Williams and Baláž 2008, 1928), equipping them with new viewpoints and financial independence that enhance their resilience to future uncertainties. Returnees described feeling more 'open' and ready to migrate again if opportunities arose, reflecting the flexible thinking Bauman (2013) identifies as central to modern life. For younger generations, migration also fosters a shift toward individualism: rather than conforming to

socially motivated spending habits or traditional obligations like *tois*, they prioritise personal purchases and build social networks with other migrant workers abroad.

This adaptive reflexivity is particularly apparent in the creative strategies migrants employ to manage instability. For example, taxi drivers returning to Kyrgyzstan juggled multiple income sources after being barred from Russia, demonstrating their ability to respond quickly to shifting circumstances. Similarly, Azamat and Marsel embody Bauman's (2013) notion of fluid identities: both used their experiences abroad to reimagine and pursue new aspirations at home, despite facing barriers of otherness in Russia. Women like Aiyimgul and Zhyldyz, meanwhile, chose to return to their communities, confronting the challenges of reintegration and gendered social stigmas with a sense of agency and purpose. In these stories of return, Kyrgyz migrants exemplify the adaptability and resilience that Bauman's (2013) liquid modernity demands in times of uncertainty. Their ability to remain flexible — to pivot between aspirations abroad and opportunities at home — highlights the fluidity of identities and livelihoods in an increasingly interconnected and unpredictable world.

Conclusion

The military conscriptions targeting Central Asians following the war in Ukraine and the consequences of living as a public secret pose critical threats for many Kyrgyz labour migrants currently residing in Russia. The rooted strategies of depending on remittance flows from migrants working abroad present dilemmas over the future of work and financial stability for communities back home. These challenges include not only immediate and long-term economic impacts but also the disruption of deep-rooted family expectations for older sons to provide and for daughters to stay home. This may be leading to potential identity reconfigurations and feelings of uselessness, especially among Kyrgyz male workers.

This paper has brought a focus to how these dilemmas are currently being faced by both the Kyrgyz labour market and the people dependent on migrating at a time of shifting generational notions of social reciprocity. Ways in which people in Bishkek decide to leave their homes for work abroad are influenced by a myriad of weighted uncertainties and possibilities — uncertainty of employment over the expense of education back home, possibilities of gaining independence away from family versus conforming to societal and gendered expectations to remain, the risk of returning home and losing that sense of independence or to return with a sense of a newly found identity. The dichotomies between individuality versus community-oriented activities were constantly weighted against each other by my interlocutors of all ages and genders. The experience of Aiyimgul showed a way of combining both, as she started her own business at home despite the challenges of reintegration. Her story also highlights how, despite the stigmas attached to female labour migration, her decision to return was fuelled by her own sense of what a meaningful future and retirement would look like for her. However, for an increasing number of people, this dichotomy is not a choice to be juggled but an immediate reality in which the only option is one or the other. This is now the case for Azamat, who, until recently, was determined to keep working his way up in Moscow but now must face the precarious consequences of returning home with no safety over future income.

This paper points to the many gendered implications which migration presents. Zhyldyz and her story of having "no other option" than to leave the country after divorcing her husband highlights the stigma of deviating from traditional gender norms. Migration, in this sense, is still a predominantly gendered phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan, despite what official data might tell. The economic downturn in Russia has had a profound effect on Kyrgyz female migrants, as many of them now find themselves without viable options to continue their employment abroad. This situation puts them at risk of returning to potentially abusive environments back home. These barriers to Russian labour migration further present questions over the future of children and bring attention to how Kyrgyz male migration has come to influence father-son and father-daughter relationships at home. This question could be incorporated into further study to better understand the implications for the

increasing patterns of return migration in Kyrgyzstan, as children living in the absence of father and mother figures is a phenomenon reported in many parts of the country (Muhametjanova and Adanır, 2022).

The Kyrgyzstan government's strategy of stabilising migration aims to alter prevailing perceptions in Kyrgyzstan about migration. While curbing emigration is a logical form of risk mitigation during economic instability, migration will remain appealing for families and individuals who see no future in Kyrgyzstan due to economic or value-based reasons, or both. I argue instead for NGOs and policymakers to adopt a multifocal approach, as demonstrated in this paper, which examines migration stages with a focus on gendered perceptions of the precarious nature of work and life abroad. By exploring intersections of gender roles, historical narratives, and perceptions of modernity, a more nuanced picture of what it means to leave or remain can be uncovered. These elements are also tied to historical notions of how work is orchestrated and controlled at the state level. This study contributes to broader discussions of remittance dependency, de-Russification in the post-Soviet region, and changing gender identities in Kyrgyzstan. The current life-threatening realities of living and working in Russia are moulding the paths of many Kyrgyz labour migrants toward unambiguity. This work illustrates how people and institutions in Kyrgyzstan are gradually making sense of and imagining their futures amid these uncertain times of movement.

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Food as a Method of Placemaking for Latin American Immigrants in the US South: A Case Study of a Neighborhood in South Nashville, Tennessee

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ABSTRACT

Diverse groups of immigrants from Latin American countries populate modern-day Nashville like many other urban areas in the US South. Since the 1990s, immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries have migrated in high numbers to the region, leading to the creation of terms like "Nuevo South." In Nashville, Latinx immigrants have culturally expressed themselves through food and food institutions have acted as impetus for a sense of community. International grocery stores and cultural restaurants not only act as mediums to spread and establish a sense of culture, but also as places for communities to form and learn from one another while integrating into a new environment. This paper will examine existing literature on the recent influx of immigration to the US South and the expression of culture via food in immigrant neighborhoods. This paper will employ Karen O'Reilly's 2012 definition of participant observation ethnographies and Mark Wyckoff's 2014 definition of placemaking to analyze immigrant-owned restaurants and grocery stores along Nolensville Pike in South Nashville as places of community. This paper seeks to prove that these food institutions constitute vital methods of placemaking for immigrants in the US South.

Keywords: Placemaking, Nuevo South, Latinx Immigrants, Food Businesses, Nashville, Tennessee

In the book, *A Place at the Nayarit*, Natalia Molina (2022) recounts the history and impact of a Mexican food restaurant owned and started by a Mexican immigrant in the Echo Park area of Los Angeles in the latter half of the twentieth century. As Molina (2022) recounts the rich history and triumph of this immigrant business, she notes how this place acts as a sanctuary from xenophobia and judgment and is a place to go to meet other migrants from a similar area in Mexico (Molina 2022). Moreover, a business like The Nayarit, owned by Natalia Barraza, can inspire other entrepreneurs to start businesses in migrant areas, food-related or not (Molina 2022). From an economic standpoint, the Nayarit also employs immigrants, which not only aids them in finding jobs upon entering a new country but can also aid in the sponsorship of undocumented immigrants who eventually desire citizenship (Molina 2022).

A space like the Nayarit provides an alternative to the dominant culture in the US—a place to go if one feels ostracized by the mainstream culture perpetuated by American society. For example, Barraza found that many people in the LGBTQIA+ community would frequent her restaurant and form relationships with the newly settled immigrant population, as its comfortable and accepting ethos transcended Latinx immigrants and extended its invitation to all community members (Molina 2022). In this sense, the restaurant bridges the gap between private and public spaces, creating a place where people can feel the values of a community away from judgment. While the restaurant certainly cares about its finances, the emotional value that a haven like the Nayarit can bring to its community often trumps its economic significance. In other words, the immigrant-owned food business

acts as a "Third Space" for its patrons, a sociological concept dating to the 1990's that depicts a space for "authentic interaction" outside one's home, school, or workplace (Gutiérrez 2008, 152). According to one of the concept's originators, Kris Gutiérrez, these "Third Spaces" can benefit one's life and development in their two primary spaces (Gutiérrez 2008).

Additionally, this restaurant opened a more intimate window into the Latinx community and their cuisine for White people in the Los Angeles area (Molina 2022). As a result, this restaurant and other cultural food outlets may risk becoming whitewashed if they begin to pay more attention to the needs of their US-born customers who desire an Americanized version of Mexican cuisine (Molina 2022).

However, the primary message Molina (2022) is that the benefits to the community outweigh these risks when the entrepreneurs behind the business devote attention to authenticity and care for their culture. This authenticity can take many forms, such as culinary techniques and local or traditional ingredients, which draw both the migrant community desiring a taste of their native region, as well as American-born patrons seeking authentic Mexican food (Schifeling and Demetry 2021).

When considering the social and cultural aspects behind food in Tennessee, the immigrant communities in Nashville that have created thriving food businesses come to mind, especially in areas like South Nashville and West Nashville. Given that immigrant families more frequently report elements of food insecurity than US-born families, immigrant-owned food businesses in low-income neighborhoods have an amplified potential to affect communities and the sense of fulfilment gained from one's diet (National Council on Aging 2024). These businesses come in the form of restaurants, grocery stores, and mobile food trucks offering cultural cuisine. In each variety, they constitute an essential mode of placemaking for foreign-born migrants in the Southeastern United States, commonly referred to as the US South. As outlined in Wyckoff (2014, 1), placemaking entails the creation of a "quality place" that is "safe, connected, welcoming, accessible, comfortable, [and]

sociable," in addition to "promot[ing] civic engagement" and "allow[ing] authentic experiences." Wyckoff (2014, 1) offers context as follows: "accessible – easy to circulate within, along and between public places; comfortable – address perceptions about cleanliness, character and charm; quiet – unless they are designed to be otherwise; sociable – have a physical fabric where people can connect with one another." Moreover, "safe" refers to physical safety while "connected" refers both to the "quality place's" physical connection to people's residences and to other quality public places (Wyckoff 2014, 1). Through research on immigration in the US South, immigrant food businesses throughout the US, as well as participant observation ethnographies of immigrant food businesses in the US South, this paper explores how founding food businesses can act as an integral method of placemaking for these communities.

The United States contains the highest number of immigrants in the world, and, as migrants travel to the country, they have formed rich cultural communities filled with people of similar backgrounds to themselves (Smith and Edmonston 1997). These two facts play into an immigrant community in the US wherein immigrants assert their presence in their new home by forming enclaves based on geographic and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, many of these communities contain cultural areas of commerce and gathering that serve not only to express their cultural background juxtaposed to the dominant culture but also to bond the community together over shared experiences and upbringings (Molina 2022). In addition to immigrant communities' use of religion, architecture, and fashion as modes of cultural expression, food and culinary traditions play a pivotal role in bringing immigrant communities together, as well as sharing their culture with US-born individuals (Lemon 2019; Molina 2022).

While indigenous people, as well as Latin American and Asian immigrants, have populated some of the US South, the area garners a fraught demographic reputation primarily through the historical oppression of Black Americans at the hands of White Americans (Guerrero 2017). Chattel slavery of

Black peoples by White slave owners perpetuated inequality until the American Civil War (Blakemore 2020). In the US South specifically, this systemic oppression continued after the war through Jim Crow laws that alienated the Black population and made it difficult for them to vote and participate in society (Blakemore 2020). Consequently, anthropologists and geographers consider the geopolitics of this area to have acted within a Black/White "binary racial system" (Weise 2015, 16).

The past three decades have come with sweeping cultural change and a demographic diversification of the US South overall, thus broadening its food options and cultural modes of expression. As a result, studying the food cultures of immigrant communities in the US South will prove paramount to understanding their methods of placemaking, as well as their role in the city and region. To understand how food has come to play such an important role in the lives of immigrants in the US South during the twenty-first century, a background on both the area's recent demographic changes and scholarship on immigrant food cultures in the US is necessary.

Immigrant-owned Food Businesses & The US South

Latin American Immigration in the Contemporary US South: Jim Crow–2010s

The reliance of the US South's economy on agriculture predates the nation's sovereignty and has continued into the contemporary era. Agrarian slavery set the foundation for an unwelcoming racial environment throughout the area via unjust treatment toward Black Americans. Slavery resulted in a racial hierarchy that prioritized White landowners who enslaved and denied the civil rights of Black people. Anti-black racism has pervaded the culture of the US South and shaped the perception of the region well into the twenty-first century. Literature has less frequently examined the treatment of more recent immigrants from Latin America and Asia, particularly their stories of racial discrimination and their attempts to assimilate

to a new environment in the US South (Guerrero 2017).

While the narrative of a Black/White binary ostracizes other groups from the cultural histories of the American South, the low volume of immigration in the US South relative to other parts of the country helps to explain this lack of a multidimensional perspective (Marrow 2011). Specifically, from the era of the US Civil War until 1990, the US South received less exposure to immigrants than any other area of the nation (Marrow 2011). In the 1990s however, various immigrant communities, especially Latinx communities, began to both immigrate to the US South in higher numbers and integrate their communities into the country (Winders 2011). These Latin American immigrants escaped countries dealing with political turmoil, lack of economic opportunities and violence (Montalvo and Batalova 2024). Regarding pull factors, the availability of jobs requiring manual labor, as well as social stability, motivated Latinx people to migrate to the US, while many also sought political asylums (National Immigration Forum 2019). During this period, the US South received the largest proportional population boost of Latin Americans compared with the rest of the country, with populations in states like the Carolinas, Tennessee, Arkansas, Georgia, and Alabama witnessing increases in this demographic by over 200% (Marrow 2011).

While the US South's Latinx immigrant population spiked in the 1990s, so did the overall foreign-born population (Marrow 2011). As a result of this increase in immigration volume, these immigrant communities new to the US South started to solidify their presence in urban and rural spaces politically, economically, socially, and culinarily (Winders 2011). According to geographer Jamie Winders (2011, 345), "U.S.- and foreign-born Mexicans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and other Latin Americans [started] buying homes, taking year-round positions, starting or bringing families, and establishing businesses, social networks, and political groups." In this sense, Latinx communities in the American South established long-term roots beginning in the 1990s and 2000s, leading to the culturally diverse communities of the twenty-first century. Consequently, research on immigration in the US South has increased dramatically since the turn of the century, and scholars have begun to investigate the intricacies of daily life, as well as the trends of larger institutions in this area among non-Black immigrant, foreign-born, and marginalized populations (Winders 2011). This trend has expanded the scope of academic research on the topic and challenged the persistent narrative of a racial binary in the US South, as scholars analyze how Black Americans and White Americans receive, interpret, and racialize, foreign immigrant groups.

Since this influx of immigration, geographers have aptly labeled the US South the "Nuevo South," a contemporary version of the "New South," which, in turn, is a term used to describe ex-confederate states in the US South after the Civil War (Mohl 2003, 56; Stuesse 2016, 68; Guerrero 2017, 8). These scholars defend this label by citing the immense changes in immigration statistics and the resultant transformation of cultural minutia in society (Mohl 2003). Notably, 2001 marked the moment when the Latinx population surpassed the Black population as the second-largest racial group in the US (Mohl 2003). In the age of the "Nuevo South," various discriminatory patterns emerge with a different ethos than the Reconstruction era following the Civil War, including the scrutiny of undocumented immigration statuses and linguistic ostracism (Mohl 2003; Guerrero 2017).

In the introduction of *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place*, US Latina/o studies scholar Perla Guerrero (2017, 9) relays the idea that the New South manifested a place where racial equity can be achieved superficially, while the "exploitation of those communities [of color], especially in the labor sphere" continued after the war. While the "Nuevo South" is an different iteration of the New South of the Reconstruction era, they are both predicated on the "exploitation of racial difference" for the economic and social benefit of people in power (Guerrero 2017, 180). Throughout this paper, the concept of "Nuevo South" will be discussed through the lens of Guerrero's (2017) definition in her introduction, analyzing its unbalanced social norms and superficial improvements over its predecessor.

Immigration and Culture in Contemporary Nashville, Tennessee

This paper will focus on Nashville, Tennessee, as a case study that examines immigrant groups in the US South and their expression of culture through food production and cuisine. Before examining Nashville's migrants' relationship to food, a background about the city's unique demographic makeup will provide necessary context. As Nashville has grown at one of the most rapid paces in the country throughout the past few decades, its culture has shifted in manners unique to its area, yet also indicative of trends throughout the US South (Frey 2012).

While larger metropolitan areas throughout the United States have experienced copious immigration from diverse sets of non-Europeans throughout their histories, these immigrants only began to migrate in high volumes to Nashville and cities in the US South in the latter part of the twentieth century (Winders 2011). As a result, Nashville has been labeled one of the nation's "New Ellis Islands" (Hull 2010, 1). Therefore, the need to study immigrant neighborhoods in Nashville has only recently gained traction as academic literature journals have recognized these sustained trends (Winders 2011). According to the local newspaper, *The Tennessean*, the state of Tennessee has had the third-highest growth in Latinx population since 2000, and projections indicate that Latin Americans will comprise one-third of Nashville's population by the end of the 2030s (Gomez and Solano 2015). This paper will pose the questions: how have immigrant communities in Nashville begun to create meaningful quality places amid such rapid growth (Wyckoff 2014)? Are these places "safe, connected, welcoming, accessible, comfortable, [and] sociable," and do they "allow for authentic experiences" and "facilitate civic engagement?" (Wyckoff 2014, 1). How do they
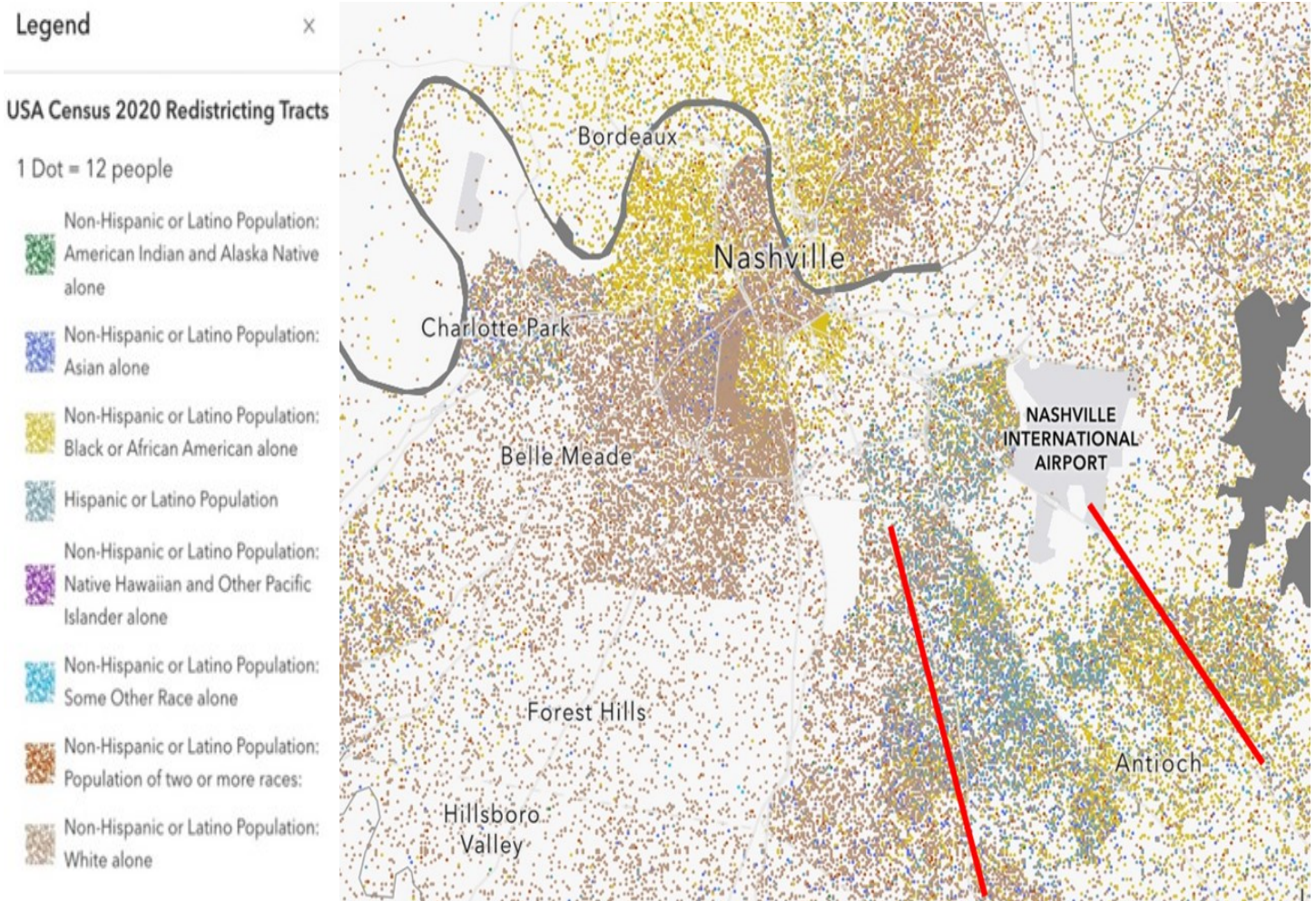

Figure 1: "Race and Ethnicity in the US by Dot Density (2020 Census)." Depicts the diversity of Nashville (Esri Demographics 2020). Outlined are the area between Nolensville Pike (left) and Murfreesboro Pike (right) that constitute "South Nashville."

compare to Molina's (2022) depiction of *The Nayarit* as centers for placemaking?

South Nashville contains the majority of the city's Latinx immigrant population in a vibrant community surrounded by many other immigrants. In this area of the city, census districts range from 6% up to 60% Latinx (Chaney 2010). According to geographer James Chaney (2010), immigrants living in communities like these sometimes rely heavily on their local area for their daily shopping and commerce due to differences in language and culture, as well as the threat of prejudice when venturing outside of their ethnic enclave. Therefore, thriving food businesses have the potential to create a meaningful third space for local migrant residents.

As well, local businesses in South Nashville (see Figure 1) represent institutional and organized modes of expressing the population's culture and creating a community, both integral aspects of adapting to life in a new country. Specifically, Nashville's immigrant entrepreneurs play a role in helping their community adjust to a new environment by providing services for the needs within their neighborhood (Hull 2010). Not only do these businesses provide food, but they also offer home décor and furniture, legal help, and emotional support via programs like Alcoholics Anonymous. Furthermore, these business owners have played a role in defending immigrant laborers and communities on a political level (Hull 2010). For example, in the late 2000s, several Latinx business owners and immigrant coalitions lobbied against a bill that would exclude non-native English speakers from participating fully in government (Hull 2010). While an examination of South Nashville at first reveals a distinct insularity, the immigrant groups that populate the area have affected many different social and political aspects throughout the city. For instance, immigrant food businesses act as a bridge to other demographic groups in Nashville, as they draw many people to South Nashville.

Not every Latinx immigrant had the funding or opportunity to start their own business, so many entered the labor force and affected the Nashville job market rapidly during the 1990s and 2000s (Winders 2011). As a result of Nashville's booming tourism industry, the service industry necessitates many low-wage workers (Ansley et. al. 2009). Given the lack of organizations and unions available to many of these low-wage immigrant workers, migrants have protested for immigrant rights. The Immigrant Community Assessment of Nashville (ICA) has accumulated quantitative statistics and conducted qualitative focus groups specific to the city wherein the ICA found that, during the 2000s, unsafe and underpaid working conditions, as well as the discrimination of immigrant workers in Nashville, indicated a need for unions and government to intervene (Ansley et. al. 2009). Furthermore, efforts by immigrant-led groups such as Workers' Dignity support low-wage workers in Nashville (Nuñez-Chavez 2023). This group primarily aims to recover lost wages and money earned by low-wage immigrant workers from employers, as well as from landlords who have taken advantage of these groups (Nuñez-Chavez 2023). While this group's influence has grown, the volume of recovered wages produced by the group illustrates the need to support these laborers to an even greater extent.

Politically, many call for Nashville and Tennessee's demographic representation in government to represent the population more accurately and equitably (Crescencio 2022). For example, as of 2022, Latin Americans comprise 14% of Nashville, yet only one Latinx person holds a position of power in the city government, and only one Latinx person before her has ever sat on Nashville's city government (Crescencio 2022). Thus, while the immigrant population has worked tirelessly to integrate into a new culture throughout the past three decades, there remains room for local governments to encourage and enact more equitable representation, which can in turn help immigrant-owned businesses thrive and create quality places.

Conceptual Frame: Wyckoff's Placemaking and Food Businesses

Wyckoff's Placemaking

This paper examines the idea of placemaking for immigrant communities in South Nashville through the lens of one definition put forth by urban planning expert and professor Mark Wyckoff (2014). While this paper discusses in length four main methods of placemaking — including standard, strategic, creative, and tactical — it also outlines nine main "results" and qualities that ensue when a quality place is created. As stated earlier, these characteristics are that a place is "safe, connected, welcoming, allow[s] authentic experiences, accessible, comfortable, quiet, sociable, [and] promote[s] and facilitate[s] civic engagement" (Wyckoff 2014, 1). The list includes a caveat that the "quiet" tenet does not hold importance if the space is not designed to be quiet, so I have excluded this from my analysis. Moreover, since Nashville and the residents of these neighborhoods have integrated a mix of all four placemaking strategies, I decided to focus my analysis on the nine "results" of quality places rather than placemaking strategies; ethnographic methods can analyze these "results" more acutely than they can assess past placemaking approaches.

Wyckoff's (2014) framework has been mapped onto different cities attempting to boost tourism, make themselves more attractive to businesses and talented employees, and increase the interaction between their residents and nature (Brito and Richards 2017; Lew 2018; Mansilla and Milano 2018; Richards 2020; Fernandez de Osso Fuentes 2023). Specifically, these papers have cited events, event spaces, modern art, and green and blue spaces as methods of placemaking for cities and their residents attempting to adapt to the twenty-first century (Brito and Richards 2017; Richards 2020; Fernandez-Osso Fuentes 2023). In fact, Brito and Richards (2017, 3) cite Nashville as an example of a city that has boosted its tourism culture through placemaking and music events, branding itself as a "music cit[y]."

Therefore, it is especially important to analyze the concept of placemaking in Nashville due to its potential to affect the city's many diverse communities in various ways. The dichotomy of these two divergent communities can illuminate the potential for the concept of placemaking to be mapped not only onto dominant cultures that attract visitors but also onto marginalized populations attempting to create quality places for themselves in their new home. Wyckoff's (2014) definition of the term will not only inform the analyses outlined in this paper, but my ethnographies of South Nashville can also inform future scholarship on placemaking's relationship to different communities. Given recent publications on placemaking and event spaces, as well as placemaking and mental health through green spaces, I expect food businesses to act as a quintessential mode of placemaking given their ability to foster local events for the community and improve mental health through authentic tastes that remind migrants of home (Brito and Richards 2017; Fernandez de Osso Fuentes 2023).

Opening Food Businesses as a Method of Cultural Placemaking for Immigrant Communities in the US

As a result of the fraught relationship between immigrants and food security, in addition to a desire to promote traditional cuisine, many have opted to open their own food businesses in immigrant neighborhoods, such as in South Nashville. These businesses take the form of restaurants and grocery stores, and scholarship recounts many perceived benefits to these communities, as well as to their respective cities and regions (Khojasteh 2023). For example, they create a place for people from similar cultural backgrounds to meet others and adjust to living in a new country together, as well as alleviate some of the problems caused by food inaccessibility.

Khojasteh (2023) outlines many benefits for the local food environment and cities due to these frequented ethnic food outlets. Through an economic lens, these businesses give entrepreneurs access to wealth and immigrants an opportunity for employment, in addition to increasing tax revenue for the city. Moreover, these businesses revitalize infrastructure in prime locations on main roads and aid in linguistic adjustment for many immigrant

workers. Most importantly, these places act as a social platform to meet other people in the area wherein they can discuss where and how to access services and adapt to a new environment. Socially, migrants can build networks among themselves here, but these businesses also act as a social bridge to other members of the community, whether US-born or not (Khojasteh 2023). From a placemaking standpoint, these businesses offer the ability to encourage connectedness, accessibility, and sociable atmospheres (Wyckoff 2014).

Ethnic Grocery Stores Challenge the Idea of Food Insecurity

In addition to the analysis of cultural food markets, Khojasteh (2023) argues that many community health and dietary benefits arise with these entrepreneurial ventures. Foreign-born individuals tend to use ethnic grocery stores and markets at a higher rate than US-born individuals. Consequently, their average food haul while obtaining groceries contains markedly more grains and fresh produce, and less than half as many saturated fats and added sugars (Khojasteh 2023). Therefore, these shops convert an inequitable food system into a health benefit for migrant communities, as their immigrant-owned ethnic food stores present healthier options than mass-market grocery stores (Khojasteh 2023).

Since immigrants and people living in low-income neighborhoods often eschew use of local mass-market grocery stores in favor of convenience stores and grocers located further away, immigrant entrepreneurs have altered this relationship by creating ethnic grocery stores that help foster a local community (Shannon 2014). The personal relationship that many patrons have with the owners or entrepreneurs of these stores, as well as the effort for authenticity put forth by these business owners separates their outlets from larger grocery corporations (The News Herald 2019). For example, Aurang Zeb of New York offers cosmetic and beauty products native to various regions of the world in his grocery store and has some of his items blessed to cater to his religious customer base (The News Herald 2019). Therefore, immigrant entrepreneurs like Zeb provide immigrant communities with an opportunity to forge interpersonal relationships amid a strong community that can compensate for an often-negative relationship with the dominant food environment. As such, these businesses can represent safety and authenticity for their communities (Wyckoff, 2014).

Scholarship has also cited the ability of international grocery stores to connect people of races and backgrounds who otherwise would not cross paths (Yu 2022). Specifically, in the region of the Mississippi Delta in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Chinese immigrants opened grocery stores that bridged the tense relationship between Black and White patrons in the Jim Crow South (Yu 2022). Similarly, modern businesses like the Nayarit have created spaces away from the dominant culture where, for example, the LGBTQIA+ community can spend time with the Latinx community, embodying contemporary multiculturalism (Molina 2022). In other words, outside of creating a space for their community, immigrant-run food businesses can foster societal connections on a larger scale, bridging gaps between social groups burdened with a history of oppression (Yu 2022).

In addition to these societal impacts, literature on the subject reminds readers that these grocery stores sometimes serve cultural food products that appropriate and Americanize other cultures (Camilo 2012). For example, one grocery outlet in North Carolina serves bao buns, a Chinese food, with Korean and Vietnamese sauces to cater to the diverse enclave of Asian Americans living in the area, and to American taste buds as well (Camilo 2012). While this example may not be unique to the US South, it illustrates one type of adaptation that a dish may experience under its newfound geographic home.

The Intersection of Immigrant Food Cultures and the US South

Throughout the past three decades, the concept of immigrant food businesses has become a household notion in the US South. The idea has become so ubiquitous that residents of Lexington, Kentucky find themselves calling the area of town with

Mexican food options "Mexington" (Agyeman and Giacalone 2020, 295). While many of the immigrant-owned food businesses in the "Nuevo South" strive and brand for "authenticity", their foods replicate but do not often copy the exact taste from their homeland (Agyeman and Giacalone 2020, 246). A possible reason for this could be the often-stubborn American palate that resists international tastes, a concept that makes Nashville's thriving and diverse food scene different from what it may initially seem. In fact, many immigrant-owned restaurants attempt to "revamp" or "glamorize" their ethnic food options to cater to White American tastes, often begrudgingly (Agyeman and Giacalone 2020, 68).

Regarding the Latinx community's relationship to food in Nashville, scholarship has only scratched the surface in analyzing this interdisciplinary topic (Winders 2011; Alcantara 2020). Winders's (2011) research on Nashville and interviews with South Nashville immigrants have revealed that Latinx community members believe that long-time Nashville residents perceive South Nashville primarily as an area to acquire food (Winders 2011). In other words, food has become a part of the label that many people tag onto Latinx immigrants in Nashville due to the surplus of ethnic food options on Nolensville and Murfreesboro Pikes. The undesired marriage of these two concepts may exacerbate an existent economic need for immigrant-owned food businesses to cater to the dominant White American palate.

Methods: Ethnographies & Participant Observation

Before delving into the methods that I used, it is important to contextualize my experiences with background information about myself. I am a White man from New York whose ancestors immigrated to Brooklyn more than four centuries ago seeking economic opportunity and solace from religious persecution. On one side, my roots are Ukrainian and Jewish, while my other side is Irish Catholic and Italian. Despite my diverse roots, I lack a sense of belonging to anywhere other than the United States, more specifically New York. During my teenage years in one of Manhattan's most

diverse high schools, however, I learned from the stories of my classmates, 40% of whom were first-generation Americans. During these formative years, I experienced these stories second-hand through my classmates, and while commuting through four different trains each way to school, I passed through many different immigrant neighborhoods. Moreover, I worked toward mastery of the Spanish language through my courses and weekly volunteering trips to 'Spanish Harlem,' acquiring a deeper appreciation for my peers and neighbors born outside of the country. As I describe my ethnographies below, it is important to understand the limitations set by my US-born background and how it affected my sense of place and belonging, despite my fluency in the language compensating for some of these barriers. Specifically, my perception as an outsider may lead some patrons and employees to change their habits, and my inexperience in immigrant-dominant spaces can lead to misguided observations on my part.

In addition to personal details, my work and volunteer experience in both the food industry and immigrant communities warrant a brief overview. Specifically, I worked in various roles such as a server and busser in a restaurant in Sarasota, Florida, for four years, meeting many migrant workers during my experience. I also worked on behalf of the Tennessee SNAP program during the summer of 2023, wherein I conducted research on the program and interacted with Tennessee government employees responsible for giving out SNAP benefits. While these experiences did not explicitly involve working with immigrant-owned food businesses, they allowed me to enter my ethnographies with auxiliary knowledge about the food system in the US South. Furthermore, my experience volunteering at English classes at a church in one of Nashville's immigrant neighborhoods perpetuated my interest in immigrant stories and transplanted it onto a different region, culture, and landscape of immigration. Specifically, the stories that I encountered of Latin American and Middle Eastern immigrants at these volunteer sessions piqued curiosity in this research area and a desire for Nashville to set a more equitable path forward for its residents.

This study employs participant observation ethnographies conducted in Nashville to inform its research about the relationship between immigrants and food in the US South. During four separate trips, I visited various ethnic grocery stores and restaurants in immigrant neighborhoods surrounding urban areas (see Figure 2). Specifically, I entered many places throughout South Nashville along Nolensville Pike, including Latin American food outlets. As an anthropological study, a qualitative approach held more weight when collecting data. I chose participant observation as research method for this study because it allowed me to make the connection between person and place and more closely observe residents' relationship to their sense of place. While conducting surveys or focus groups may have offered more depth, they would have disengaged participants from their environment (Bryman 2016). Moreover, given the scope and short timeline of this undergraduate project, limiting this study to covert ethnographies alleviated potential scheduling conflicts and complications. These participant observation sessions came with limitations. For example, I was not able to ask direct questions to understand the patrons' and employees' perspectives on their own communities more deeply. However, taking four trips to this area of Nashville helped alleviate some of these challenges, as I attained a requisite sense of depth and a more enriched view of this area's culture after repeated visits.

Referencing literature on various research methods, including O'Reilly (2012), *Ethnographic Methods*, guided my trips and my subsequent analyses. For example, O'Reilly's (2012) emphasis on the importance of time influenced the volume of visits that I conducted, as well as urged me to visit the same institutions multiple times. And, most importantly, this literature review of ethnographic methods yielded advice for the field notes and photographs that I used as primary sources, notably emphasizing the balance one must strike between observing and note-taking, the difficult decisions that come with said balance, and the importance of taking notes that will translate well into a final paper (O'Reilly 2012; Taussig 2011).

While traveling in and out of multiple places during each visit, I browsed through the aisles of grocery stores and interacted with the staff, including cashiers and other employees, to carry out transactions and learn about the store. In restaurants and markets, I often sat down to interact with the service staff and observe interactions taking place between the patrons. During these observations, I attempted to gain a deeper understanding of the concept of placemaking for immigrant communities and how food businesses can contribute to this idea, while searching for Wyckoff's (2014) indicators of placemaking and quality places. While my observations act as standalone research to learn more about community formation of immigrant groups in the US South, they will also inform my suggestions for further research on the topic.
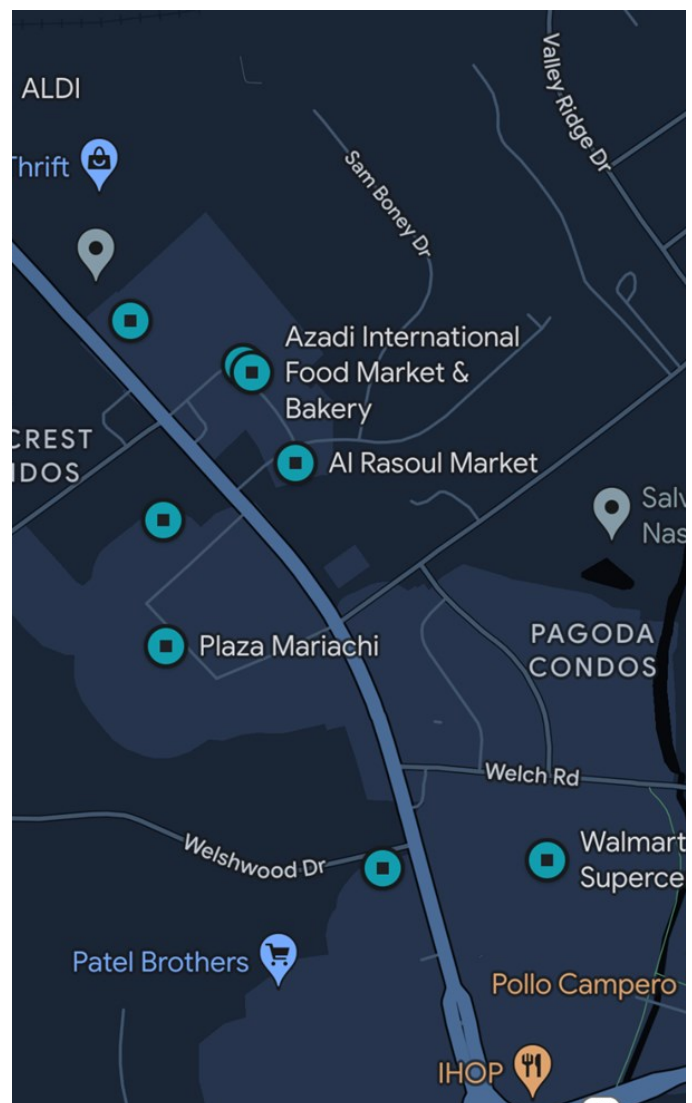

Figure 2: Google Maps screenshot depicting where research was conducted on Nolensville Pike (sites in blue)

Results

I trekked from the WeGo Transit Bus Route 52 stop uphill toward Plaza Mariachi, a popular location for the Latinx community in Nashville. In the parking lot, the shouting and panting of children dribbling through Chevy Silverados to play a pickup soccer game outside the Plaza caught my attention as their parents chatted with one another and cheered them on. As I walked by, I could hear one parent yell toward her son that it was "*la hora de comer*," or dinnertime. Upon entering the Plaza, the ceaseless sound of chatter throughout the large open space filled the ambiance, along with the television sounds of the NFL playoffs and the Nashville SC MLS game, as well as the thumping of cowboy boots. Immediately, I came to my first realization — that the pickup trucks in the parking lot, the American sports on the TVs, and the popularity of cowboy boots in the plaza represented part of the lived experience for Latin American immigrants in the US South. While their roots are Latin American, they now live in Tennessee, a central part of their identity. Yet, the copious food options, and the mariachi music that would follow tie them back to their Latinx roots. As Jamie Winders (2011) points out, these Latinx immigrants are actively changing what it means to be Southern – an idea supported by my ethnographies, as I observed the unmistakable cultural synthesis of these two groups at Plaza Mariachi. Here, I realized that the mingling of these two cultures transcends food and pervades many aspects of contemporary life such as sports, fashion, language, and transportation.

Not only did the hybrid nature of my experience embody the lived experiences of the people who own and operate it, but it placed importance on their cuisine as a mode of cultural expression (Agyeman and Giacalone 2020). In this realization manifests one of the tenets of Wyckoff's (2014, 1) "quality place" in that it "allow[s] authentic experiences." According to the Plaza Mariachi website, this food court area "exists to celebrate cultural diversity... [and is] a gathering place for all ages and all backgrounds to experience and participate in the beauty of international expression" (Plaza Mariachi 2024). The Latin American community created Plaza Mariachi to build a platform to celebrate their own culture. This place represents an integral part of an immigrant's journey into their new home as they can acquire an organized sense of belonging despite being inequitably ostracized from other areas of society, such as in politics and the dominant food system. Having opened in 2017, Plaza Mariachi embodies the recent increased organization and commercialization of immigrant businesses in urban areas in the US South (News Channel 5 Nashville 2017). As the Latinx population has diversified from mostly adult males in the 1990s to families comprising people of many different ages today, the community has felt more empowered to create cultural hubs in this manner (News Channel 5 Nashville 2017; Winders 2011). Plaza Mariachi transcends just improving the foodscape for immigrants, as it hosts events for children, religion, and the arts, as well as second-hand markets (Plaza Mariachi 2024). Upon entering this rich cultural enterprise, I noticed how the community bonded over food as many families and friends dined in the large open space in the center. I even noticed one family eating different types of Latinx food from the different options in the plaza, but they were able to dine together due to the community-friendly open setup. My observations certainly aligned with Perla Guerrero's contention regarding the pervasive role of the family in Latinx culture after immigrating to the US South, as I saw many nuclear families (Guerrero 2017). The Plaza and its shopping center host outlets for Mexican, Peruvian, and Venezuelan food, among other cuisines. In its diversity of events, inclusion of various cuisines, and open-floor layout, the plaza epitomizes placemaking by being "welcoming," "accessible," "sociable," and "promot[ing] civic engagement" (Wyckoff 2014, 1).

Toward the end of my meal, conversations began to halt as the titular event commenced at the center of the main room. Soon, the five-part mariachi band started their first joyous tune that featured a harmonious mix of vocals and string instruments, complemented by one trumpet player. Before long, children stopped playing and adults stopped talking until the music ascended into the auditory foreground. The ability of music to catch everyone's

attention underscored the plaza's importance to the community: not simply as a place for acquiring food, but to share cultural traditions and bond as a community. This place feels "comfortable" for its consumers, as it offers an ethos of "character and charm," increasing its credibility as a quality place (Wyckoff 2014, 1). Most importantly, the plaza on Nolensville Pike is a safe space that acts as a haven from unfair treatment and the inequitable society that surrounds the community. In this sense, it also embodies Gutiérrez's concept of a "Third Space," as it offers the opportunity to interact and communicate more authentically with one another (Gutiérrez 2008).

In addition to Plaza Mariachi, I visited the Mexican restaurant Los Arcos and the food truck Chiqui Tacos. At these sites, my observations similarly aligned with the literature to an extent, while I also had unexpected encounters, suggesting a need for further research. As I walked into Los Arcos Mexican Restaurant at 11AM on a weekday, the hostess greeted me in Spanish amid a mostly empty restaurant save for a few patrons. Most noticeable throughout the restaurant was the distinctly Latin American décor, dominated by the Mexican flag and images of places in Latin America. As the group of waitresses realized that English would be my preferred language, they sent over the waitress with the most English fluency to greet me and take my order. While Plaza Mariachi provided a space for families to dine, I noticed that many solo parties entered Los Arcos seeking a sit-down meal. Not only do the immigrant-owned businesses on Nolensville Pike provide a space for families seeking community, but these spaces also serve as a place to take one's lunch break in the comfort of their native culture. In reference to Los Arcos as a quality place, it felt "safe" among all other attributes, as people most people dined alone (Wyckoff 2014, 1).

A short distance down the road sits Chiqui Tacos, a Mexican food truck parked in a semipublic space beside the local liquor store. The truck's mobile nature immediately "facilitate[s] civic engagement" through its ability to connect various areas of the city with one another (Wyckoff 2014, 1). With a Halloween-themed whiteboard menu and makeshift tent dining attached to the truck, the effort behind this one-man business became salient throughout my experience. The truck radiated a conspicuous and pleasant aroma through the street, drawing me toward it with the smell of an eclectic mix of spices and sauces. While much of Chiqui Tacos seemed to fit seamlessly into the literature on the cultural Nuevo South, this specific iteration of the Taco Truck seemed more adapted to this community than Lemon's (2019), *The Taco Truck*, described. Specifically, with flat wheels dug into the ground and tables emanating from the side of it, this truck seemed more permanent than many of the California trucks that Lemon (2019) depicted. Lemon (2019) even describes trucks that oscillate between agricultural wine country and more urban spaces, while Nashville's truck appears stagnant. These discrepancies can be attributed to an array of possibilities, including a more hostile police presence or more restrictive laws in Tennessee that may limit access to public spaces. On the other hand, Nashville's Mexican population resides mostly in one area, while California's urban metroplexes contain different enclaves of Mexican populations (Esri Demographics 2020). Despite these initial takeaways, the intersection between taco trucks and the Nuevo South represents another area for further investigation, using the Taco Trucks' decades-long experiences in California as a benchmark.

Conclusion

During the 1990s, the US South began receiving many more immigrants from Latin America and the Middle East than previously recorded, a pattern that has continued well into the twenty-first century. Immigrants from all backgrounds have faced hardships since immigrating to the US in large numbers, such as scrutiny over immigration status, linguistic barriers, a lack of political representation, and the exploitation of labor.

One particularly pertinent aspect of adversity endured by immigrants today is inequitable access to food and groceries that comprise a healthy and affordable diet. While increasing equal access to food will prove an effective way to mitigate this issue, immigrant communities

have partially compensated for this fraught relationship to food access by founding authentic outlets for cultural cuisine. These enterprises come in the form of restaurants, grocery stores, and food trucks. Not only do these places act as spaces for immigrant communities to enjoy comforting food and for US-born locals to learn about the culture of their neighbors, but they are invaluable community builders. According to both contemporary literature and my observations in Nashville, immigrant communities use these spaces as gathering spots to help them adjust to a new country, feel more at home, and forge invaluable connections. Although Nashville hosts a diverse array of immigrants from all over the world, Latin American communities have built an especially high number of these institutions on Nolensville Pike where I conducted observations in the Fall of 2023. After synthesizing the data from these ethnographies with the above literature review, it is evident that the founding of food businesses for cultural cuisine by migrants in the US South constitutes an invaluable mode of placemaking. Among other benefits, these spaces are "safe...welcoming...and facilitate civic engagement" socially, culturally, and economically, in alignment with Wyckoff's (2014, 1) definition.

In addition to investigating the concept of placemaking, this research has helped to identify two areas where further study can be conducted in alignment with this trend. First, I believe that the advancement and Americanization of the taco truck business warrants further research, as my observations seem to suggest a recent advancement in this sector. While there exists literature on the phenomenon of the mobile taco truck, my research suggests that some trucks may lack ease of mobility and thus the spreading of culture that comes with it. Further study can prove especially important given that this facet of the immigrant food business industry has an elevated potential to act as a mode of placemaking for immigrants. Specifically, when a food truck can be mobile and occupy public and semipublic spaces, it can be "connected," one of Wyckoff's (2014) indicators of quality placemaking that South Nashville lacked relative to the other indicators.

Second, I believe that the interaction among international cultures and their respective immigrant-owned businesses across communities in the US South represents another area for further investigation. In other words, immigrant communities have developed vastly different yet intertwined businesses on the same street as one another in Nashville, and I believe the interaction between these communities deserves more research. While the broad scope of this paper likely categorizes it as a study on geography and diaspora studies, these areas for further study may fall within the purview of anthropology. However, I believe that scholars in geography, anthropology, and sociology can conduct the above next steps to complement this research.

The aforementioned factors embody a ubiquitous desire among Nashville's Latin American immigrant population for the creation of quality places. In cities like Nashville, this desire can engender empathy from politicians and lead to more equitable representation across branches of state and local governments. Especially given the US South's fraught history of racial divides, immigrant food businesses can encourage a path forward for the region defined by an urbanism of harmony and equitable cultural expression.

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