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LGBTI+ Language and Understandings in Nepal: Creating Spaces and Forging Identities

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Abstract

The 1990 Nepali Constitution opened up opportunities for many forms of activism, and identity groups thus began solidifying to advocate for social change and justice (Karki 2012). After the Nepali Supreme Court ruling in 2007, Nepal became one of the first countries to offer a third gender category “Other,” becoming a leader for human rights in South Asia and the world (Mahato 2017). As Coyle and Boyce (2013) point out, there is little research on LGBTI individuals in Nepal. Furthermore, they advocate for more research and closer work with gender and sexual minority individuals in Nepal.

This research attempts to increase understanding of Nepali LGBTI people’s lived realities and daily experiences, along with the language and terms used by these individuals and in government legislation. To do so, I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with LGBTI individuals and activists across Nepal. Relying on queer phenomenology theories (Ahmed 2006) and queer linguistic methodologies (Motschenbacher 2013), I analyze how these individuals understand their identities and desires, how they must grapple with prevailing heteronormative discourses in Nepal, and how gender and sexuality are conceived of in Nepal and in the Nepali language. Additionally, I examine how global north terminology (e.g. LGBTI, transgender) has simultaneously helped and hindered activist efforts in Nepal. Incorporating Zimman and Hall (2009), I also draw on participants’ discussion of body to understand the relationship among linguistic practice, identity, and space.

Keywords: LGBTI+, gender and sexual minorities, queer phenomenology, queer linguistics, disidentification, heteronormativity, linguistic activism

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Literature Review	2
Methods	8
<i>Limitations</i>	10
<i>Ethics</i>	10
Theoretical Approach	11
<i>'Third Gender' Studies</i>	13
<i>Power, Heteronormativity, and Queer Theory(ies)</i>	13
<i>Bodies</i>	15
<i>Kinship in the Nepali Language</i>	16
Research / Findings	17
<i>LGBTI-related Language</i>	17
<i>Kinship Terms</i>	17
<i>Gender and Sexuality Terminology in Nepali</i>	19
<i>Third/Other/Trans Gender</i>	20
<i>Identity Language form the Global North</i>	23
<i>Indigeneity and Gender/Sexuality Terminology in Nepal Bhasa</i>	25
<i>Understanding Self</i>	27
<i>Bodies</i>	30
<i>Discrimination and Refusal to Understand</i>	33
<i>Heteronormativity in Nepal</i>	37
<i>Space</i>	39
Analysis	42
<i>Demographic Connections</i>	42
<i>Connection to Previous Research</i>	43
<i>Connection to Theoretical Approaches</i>	44
Conclusion / Theorizing Futures	51
<i>Future Research Needed</i>	53
Glossary of Terms	54
Sources	55
List of Interviews	59

Introduction

For this research, I collected life stories and narratives of lived realities and daily experiences of LGBTI people in Nepal. I analyze how they place and understand themselves in local, national, and international contexts, focusing on the agency they are able to find within structures of power. Given the lack of widespread knowledge surrounding LGBTI existence and experiences in Nepal, many use Western terms, such as ‘transgender’ and ‘LGBTI,’ as a frame of reference. My research will also focus on how these individuals (linguistically) self-identify, and more specifically, how they conceptualize their identities, the connotations with such terms, and the changing linguistic usage in Nepal of certain terms that refer to gender and sexuality. In addition, I study how these participants have been activists in their community, what methods they have used, and what the perceived consequences of this activism have been.

More in-depth, ethnographic narratives can provide more insight into how gender and sexual minorities in Nepal identify, understand themselves, and are affected by societal power structures. Since gender and sexual minorities in Nepal can face disproportionate risks of discrimination and violence, this research provides better understandings of LGBTI individuals’ lived realities and daily experiences while also providing a voice to those often overlooked, devalued, and misunderstood. Furthermore, from a linguistic point of view, this research expands knowledge in the field of Queer Linguistics, specifically on the adoption of English/global north words, identities, and their corresponding connotations.

To better understand LGBTI individuals’ lived realities and daily experiences, I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with LGBTI individuals and activists across Nepal. Relying on queer phenomenology theories (Ahmed 2006) and queer linguistic methodologies (Motschenbacher 2013), I analyze how these individuals understand their identities and desires,

how they must grapple with prevailing heteronormative discourses in Nepal, and how gender and sexuality are conceived of in Nepal and in the Nepali language. Additionally, I examine how global north terminology (e.g. LGBTI, transgender) has simultaneously helped and hindered activist efforts in Nepal. Incorporating Zimman and Hall (2009), I also draw on participants' discussion of body to understand the relationship among linguistic practice, identity, and space.

My field work began in Kathmandu and Lalitpur, primarily working with the LGBTI rights organization Mitini Nepal, and interviewing many of their contacts. I also used a snowball sampling method based on some of the people I met with to find more participants. Mitini Nepal also gave me contacts in Southeastern Nepal, allowing me to travel to the cities Damak, Birtamod, and Itahari in the districts Jhapa and Sunsari and conduct more interviews. The interviews in these three cities were primarily conducted with activists affiliated with Mitini Nepal, but many were (also) affiliated with Blue Diamond Society's office in Sunsari.

Literature Review

Not much scholarly research has been done on the lives of LGBTI individuals in Nepal, and little to no work has been done on the usage of global north identificatory terms in Nepal. Some research points to the discrimination and hardships faced by gender and sexual minorities in Nepal, such as Coyle and Boyce (2015) and Bista (2012), while others focus on LGBTI history and activism in Nepal, such as Mahato (2017) and Karki (2012). Oestreich (2018) primarily focuses on interventions and advocacy from the UN and NGOs, though mainly focuses on two UN programs. This literature review will summarize and synthesize these sources, though it will also illuminate the gaps in LGBTI research in Nepal.

Though Nepal was not colonized, Western attitudes that stigmatize sexual and gender minorities was adapted by British colonies such as India, which in turn influenced twentieth

century Nepal (Mahato 2017). Furthermore, there was little information or education about the topic. The 1990s brought about the establishment and growth of LGBTI movements in Nepal (Mahato 2017). In 1992, the first HIV donor funding arrived in Nepal because of the international HIV/AIDS pandemic (Mahato 2017). Most of the activism surrounding homosexuality and third gender rights was conducted in Ratna Park, though there was not an officially registered organization (Mahato 2017).

Learning from activists and LGBTI movements abroad, Sunil Babu Pant decided Nepal needed similar movements. In 2001, he and other grassroots activists created the Blue Diamond Society (BDS), a non-governmental organization (NGO). Because Pant was told that the organization could only be registered if the goal was to convert people to heterosexual, the organization was registered as a sexual health and human rights organization without mention of homosexuality (Mahato 2017). International aid agencies and the US Embassy supported BDS's work early on, and funding from international donors came after it was registered as an NGO (Mahato 2017). With other groups, BDS helped create an umbrella organization – the Federation of Sexual and Gender Minorities, Nepal (FSGMN). Oestreich (2018) also examines international aid agencies and the UN's projects in Nepal, but both Mahato (2017) and Oestreich (2018) focus on how these aid agencies have helped the organization Blue Diamond Society while not even mentioning other organizations such as Mitini Nepal or Inclusive Forum Nepal. The programs Oestreich (2018) touches on have promoted the recognition of third gender categories; however, the mention of these programs is accompanied with no discussion on what this recognition means, whether applying the term “LGBT” throughout Asia is problematic, and what “moving beyond...[discriminatory] obstacles” actually entails.

In addition to activists' work in advancing LGBTI rights in Nepal, identity politics and the process of 'coming out' have also played a part in the progress. Sociologist Mrigendra Karki (2012) argues that, as in the West, identity has emerged as a "powerful theory to organize people" in Nepal. It has been used as a vehicle of collective emancipation from marginalization. He further argues that after 1990, the Nepali constitution opened up opportunities for all forms of activism, especially since multiparty liberal democracy legitimized collective identity movements. New political parties would endorse identity groups in their agenda to gain more support. In 1996, the newly formed Maoist party began advocating for social change and justice in Nepal, and they thus brought identity issues into the core of their movement (Mahato 2017, Karki 2012). Identity groups also began solidifying as conflict based experiences with the state affected LGBTI individuals' lives (Karki 2012). Forming more collective identities helped activists such as Pant organize their movements and fight for social change.

As activists embraced identity politics as a way to fight for rights, visibility became important, and many gender and sexual minorities began 'coming out.' LGBTI individuals in Nepal suffer from many manifestations of social exclusion on community and national levels (Bista 2012). Because LGBTI persons face much marginalization and discrimination in Nepal, it is often difficult to accept one's 'self' if it contradicts the dominant heterosexual structure (Bista 2012). With the help of BDS, and especially after the Supreme Court decision in 2007, many 'third gender' individuals and LGBTI persons began coming out (Chhetri 2017, Bista 2012).

Coming out is not easy for LGBTI persons, as they often experience marginalization and may be forced to leave home if they live in rural areas (Bista 2012). In fact, family members often drive away such members in order to protect "their families' prestige in society" (Chhetri 2017). There can be familial, economic, educational, and social costs to coming out, though

many LGBTI persons who are only partially 'out' report living with anxiety, fear, frustration, and depression (Bista 2012). Because of activists' work over the past couple decades and the corresponding reliance on identity politics, many LGBTI individuals face the difficult decision of relying on identity politics and coming out in order to gain visibility in society to advance their rights. For most, it is not an easy decision, and there are many possible repercussions.

Furthermore, Coyle and Boyce (2015) argue that a person's political economies and livelihood opportunities are shaped by social contexts, social structures, and personal experiences. They report that many gender and sexual minorities experience tensions between their own desires and heteronormative social pressures from family and peers. In fact, they argue that early age experiences in school are key and can greatly influence their future. Many gender and sexual minorities report high rates of dropout, bullying, and teasing in school, which leads to unwanted attention (Coyle and Boyce 2015). Coyle and Boyce argue that schools are sites where sexual violence and rape can and do occur. Education, however, is a key factor to citizen's future socioeconomic opportunities in Nepal; one's education affects access to state and private resources, which in turn add to one's ability to even respond to discrimination and violence. Given that negative educational experiences disproportionately affect gender and sexual minority people, this unequal access to quality education perpetuates a poverty cycle that gender and sexual minority individuals can easily be caught in (Coyle and Boyce 2015). Families and social networks play key roles in access to education, so some gender and sexual minorities might feel pressure to conform to certain heteronormative expectations. With many teachers feeling too awkward to even teach sex education, this further puts gender and sexual minorities at risk of contracting STIs and HIV.

For safety and protection, many gender and sexual minorities choose to maintain some level of secrecy within different areas of their lives (Coyle and Boyce 2015). For some, however, their gender performance and hypervisibility can lead to more targeted discrimination. In fact, Coyle and Boyce report that transgender individuals have lost work, been harassed, and struggle to find places to live. Furthermore, they fear bank and loan discrimination. Third gender-identifying individuals expressed fears about obtaining passports reflecting their gender identity because they thought it would lead to the impossibility of obtaining a job in another country. For some, sex work provides a space to freely express gender and sexually variant identities and desires. However, in these socioeconomic spaces that are associated with gender and sexual difference, more harassment and discrimination occurs. For those who choose to maintain secrecy, they may find some freedom. In fact, many have found ways to create new spaces of acceptance (Coyle and Boyce 2015). However, secrecy and anonymity in the peripheries can make these individuals more prone to discrimination and permit abuse and harassment.

Very little of the research on LGBTI lives in Nepal have mentioned the linguistic nuances of gender and sexuality. In Nepal, heterosexuality is often assumed and is considered normal and ordinary (Bista 2012). Failing to conform to these standards can lead to discrimination and exclusion. Identifying as LGBTI or sexual and gender minority (SGM) can leave one feeling powerless and alienated (Mahato 2017). Many local terms exist in ethnic languages and in Nepali to denote ‘third gender’ individuals. This includes *Meti* and *Natuwas* in Eastern Nepal, *Mehara*, *Kothi*, *Khoja*, *Mauga* in the Terai, *Phulumulu* in the mountains, and *Singaru* in western hill region (Mahato 2017). In addition, *Baranath* can be used for “butch females or third gender.” According to BDS, *Theshro Ligni* can be used as an umbrella term for people who do not “comply with perceived gender roles” (Mahato 2017). In some villages they can be called

Chhakka and *Hijda*, but for some third gender individuals, these are considered offensive (Chhetri 2017). In addition, intersex persons in Nepal are often called and understood as *Hijada*, which Chhetri compares to *Hijras* in India. However, the term *Hijada* can also be considered offensive.

Though most of these terms refer to gender identity, the authors do not mention how these terms relate to sexuality. BDS played a major role in initiating and advancing LGBTI rights in Nepal, but their terms ‘LGBTI’ and ‘third gender’ are global north terms. Mahato (2017) argues that BDS “[defined] the community as LGBTI,” which is perhaps when this global north identification became popular and present in Nepal. Furthermore, the Nepali Supreme Court’s 2007 decision used and defined the (global north) term “transgender” as opposed to the many identities previously listed. In Article 42 of Nepal’s new Constitution, it uses the term “gender and sexual minorities.” Passport and citizenship certificates list an alternate gender option as “other,” further complicating the plurality of terms used to describe and incorporate these identities (Chhetri 2017). Many LGBTI-related terms and identities exist in Nepal, though in recent history, activists and government documents have relied on particular terms that are common in the West.

Overall, these scholarly works focus on LGBTI lives, discrimination, coming out, and aid agencies in Nepal. Even with all this activist work and history, LGBTI individuals still experience discrimination and marginalization, and coming out can have significant consequences. Thus, activists and NGOs persist in the constant struggle for freedom and justice as there is much more work to be done in Nepal. Furthermore, Nepal is very diverse, and these sources do not take into account the varying experiences of LGBTI individuals in Nepal and how they can differ based on factors such as geographic location or caste. These sources also do not

interrogate why global north terms used to describe gender and sexuality are so common in Nepal. Though these sources all address LGBTI lives and issues they face in Nepal, there is still much more work to be done.

Methods

I only included participants who identify in some way as LGBTI, third gender, other gender, gender minority, and/or sexual minority. Many of the participants are affiliated with LGBTI rights organizations in Nepal, specifically Mitini Nepal and Blue Diamond Society. All participants were found either through these organizations or through snowball sampling. I interviewed the first five participants in Nepal's capital, Kathmandu. I interviewed nine additional participants in Damak, Birtamod, and Itahari in southeastern Nepal. However, many of the participants grew up in other areas of the country and thus carry different backgrounds and experiences. Research questions primarily addressed the participants' life stories, their daily experiences, challenges and discrimination, terms they identify with, and how those identities are understood in society.

This research primarily uses critical discourse analysis to analyze the semi-structured interviews. Drawing on some of the semi-structured interview techniques presented in Frances (1992), my semi-structured interview questions would focus on their childhood, their present situation, what life is like for them in Nepal, how they identify, and what certain (gender and sexuality-related) terms mean to them. Given time constraints and a language barrier, a true ethnography did not seem feasible in more remote communities where I planned research. In addition, I visited several places in Nepal, meaning I was not able to effectively do a case study. Most of my interviews were one-on-one, but one interview was more of a focus group with four

people given time and language constraints. To keep anonymity, all participants have been assigned a randomized letter based on an online generator.

After travelling and conducting interviews, I transcribed all the interviews that were conducted in English using the transcription software ELAN. I also worked with a translator who transcribed the interviews that were conducted in Nepali, and they translated them into English. After transcribing, I used the program NVivo to code all the data and transcripts. I coded based on my initial research questions and other common themes that I saw emerging. I then interpreted the data and themes through several analytical frameworks, including critical discourse analysis, queer linguistics, and queer theory.

Understanding methodological challenges of cross-language qualitative research, I relied on Squires's (2009) synthesis of these methodological challenges, along with van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, and Deeg's (2010) discussion of these challenges. While my translator was not present for the interview, they were able to translate the interviews in the following week. Since both my translator and I belong to the LGBTI+ community, we both have better understandings of identities, challenges, and experiences; I was able to relate to my participants, and my translator was able to translate the necessary terminology and provide answers to any translation questions. After receiving the translations, I cross-checked them with the interview in Nepali, making notes of these identificatory terms and how they were translated. My translator did not participate in the study; while not a professional translator, they are fluent in English and were able to provide better translations than an actual translator given the lack of widespread knowledge of LGBTI issues and language in Nepal.

Limitations

My research will only focus on the life narratives of 17 individuals, so my research can not necessarily be applicable on a nation-wide scale. However, it will help illuminate several people's lived realities and daily experiences. Furthermore, as an LGBTQ person, I am coming into this research with my own biases, and I do activist work in my own community surrounding LGBTQ issues. Therefore, I do my best to accurately portray each individual's own work and experience, trying not to allow my global north ideas of gender and sexuality cloud my judgment or understanding of gender and sexuality in Nepal. In addition, there are time limitations, as this research was only conducted for one month.

Furthermore, none of my participants' first language was English. I conducted 12 of the interviews in Nepali. While my level is certified Advanced Low, there were some limitations in my own understandings and ability to ask follow-up questions. I relied on a translator for the interviews conducted in Nepali.

Ethics

Before conducting any of my research, I submitted my proposal for IRB approval, and it was approved by my academic director and the local review board in Nepal. I adhered to human subjects policies and ethical research guidelines. This involves not working with vulnerable populations. While members of the LGBTI community face marginalization in Nepal, they have many political and legal protections (even if they might not be implemented well).

In addition, I obtained informed consent before each interview. This included explaining the study, study procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality, and participation. I explained that I would not use any of their personal information, including their name, in the study. In addition, I (and my translator, if necessary) would be the only ones who had access to

audio files and transcripts. I also informed them that they could refuse to answer any question if they felt uncomfortable, and they could withdraw at any point, in which case I would erase all data. I then obtained oral or written consent before starting the interview. I also allowed each participant to choose a location for the interview where they felt the most comfortable.

As I worked with a translator for some of the interviews, the translator also abided by the same ethical guidelines. This included having them delete audio files and transcripts from their computers immediately after sending the transcripts to me.

Theoretical Approach

This study uses critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA understands that language “both *shapes and is shaped by society*” (Machin & Mayr 2012, emphasis in original). CDA is committed to “political intervention and social change.” CDA is interested in studying complex social phenomena, and it requires a multi-methodical and multi-disciplinary approach (Wodak & Meyer 2009). Furthermore, CDA involves interdiscursive, linguistic, and multimodal analysis (Fairclough 2013). The CDA methodology of this study will primarily draw from Fairclough (2013) since his discursive work on language, ideology, and power show how narratives and texts can illuminate not only broader discourses, but also broad ideologies and power relations at play. However, my incorporation of CDA methodologies differs from the common systemic-functional investigation. For all of the participants, English was not their first language. I conducted some of the interviews in Nepali, as some of the participants did not speak English; while my level is Advanced Low, there were some limitations in my own understandings and ability to ask follow-up questions. I relied on a translator for the interviews conducted in Nepali; the translator, who speaks fluent English, also belongs to the LGBTI community in Nepal and was thus more aware of gender and sexuality-related terms in both English and Nepali. Since

none of the interviewees' first languages was English, and many of the interviews needed translation, a systemic-functional discourse analysis methodology did not seem feasible.

Queer linguistics, as a form of critical discourse analysis, seeks to deconstruct identity categories. Motschenbacher (2011) describes queer linguistics as “critical heteronormativity research from a linguistic point of view.” CDA is useful for queer linguistics because it focuses on the linguistic consequences of heteronormativity as a social macro-issue, along with other social and political consequences. Queer linguistics as a form of CDA can thus help show how the terms that the participants use and identify with can empower (or constrain) them in various ways. Queer linguistics as a form of CDA can also reveal the reasons why many global north terms relating to gender and sexuality are common in Nepal. In fact, queer linguist William Leap (2015) questions, “In what ways do queer voice(s) become attested within a specific global/local nexus?”

Through critical discourse analysis, and queer linguistic methodologies, I will be able to understand the lived realities and daily experiences of LGBTI individuals in Nepal, how they understand broader discourses, and how their experiences (and they themselves) run up against, within, and beyond dominant discourses surrounding gender and sexuality.

To understand the participants' responses regarding their lives, experiences, identities, and language used, many theories prove useful as analytical frameworks. These include Towle and Morgan's (2002) work on “third gender” studies; Foucault's (1978) analytics of power; queer theories which challenge heteronormativity; Sara Ahmed's (2006) queer phenomenology theories; José Muñoz's (2013) theory of disidentification; Heiko Motschenbacher's (2011, 2013) work on queer linguistics; and contemporary sociological works related to bodies and space, including O'Neill and Dua (2017), Walia (2013), Ahmed (2017), and Raha (2017).

'Third Gender' Studies

During the 1980s and 1990s, there was a rise in popularity of studying “third genders” in academia (Towle and Morgan 2002). The study of “third genders” in other countries began as a way to legitimate and support those who did not necessarily identify as cisgender in the global north. And, in recent years, ‘transgender’ has replaced ‘third gender’ (Towle and Morgan 2002, Cameron 2005). These labels have been used to describe non-normative gender identities under this umbrella category from a global north, ethnocentric standpoint. Towle and Morgan (2002) state that this Western-centric concept does not disrupt gender binarism and is flawed since it “subsumes all non-Western nonbinary identities, practices, terminologies, and histories.” This ties back to subjugated knowledges, often non-Western knowledges, being left out of academia (Foucault 1980, Collins 2009). “Third gender” studies simply add another category, but do not necessarily speak to larger power structures or the performance of gender. Towle and Morgan’s insights prove useful in studying gender in Nepal, as the concept and identity of “third gender” frequently came up in my study.

Power, Heteronormativity, and Queer Theory(ies)

For this research on LGBTI activism, I draw on Foucault’s (1978) analytics of power and resistance, as articulated in *The History of Sexuality*. He asserts, “Where there is resistance, there is power,” the primary analytic anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) draws on in her study regarding forms of resistance in power in one Bedouin community. This phrase, as Abu-Lughod articulates, is “fruitful for ethnographic analysis,” allowing one to move away from “abstract theories of power” and toward methods for studying power in particular situations. Studying LGBTI people’s lived experiences and daily realities, and consequently their resistance and

activism, will show how their resistance (and existence) prove they are caught in heteronormative and patriarchal power structures.

The study of power, and more specifically heteronormativity, has been taken up in recent decades with the rise of queer theory and queer linguistics. Sociologist Sara Ahmed (2006) explores queer phenomenology, concepts relating to orientation, phenomenology, the act of perceiving, bodily orientations, horizons, spaces, and heteronormativity to show the ways in which one becomes straight. People are expected to reach “certain points along a life course,” and Ahmed uses the metaphor of horizontal and vertical lines. Ahmed asserts that sexual orientations are performative and that things “appear on a slant” for queer people. Phenomenology emphasizes lived experiences and the intentionality of consciousness. Queer orientations interrupt straightness, which can have feelings of discomfort and disorientation. My research explores these interruptions and these queer moments of deviation. Interactions are fluid, adapting, changing, transforming; Ahmed argues that it is essential to look to privileges, lived experiences, and meaningful deviations.

Since my study explores identifications and terminology associated with identity, queer theorist José Muñoz’s theory of disidentification is also useful. Muñoz (2013) examines performances by queers of color and how they must negotiate between “a fixed identity disposition and the socially encoded roles that are available for such subjects.” Minoritarian communities must negotiate and work both within and against dominant gender and sexual norms. Disidentification can be a strategy of both resistance and survival. Queer individuals can identify with the normative or counter-identify with the queer, but Muñoz argues individuals can also disidentify – one who does not assimilate nor reject dominant ideologies and identities.

As a linguist, Motschenbacher (2011) challenges both the “hetero” and the “normative” in “heteronormative,” showing that this involves not only sexuality, but also non-normative relationships in general. Motschenbacher asserts that heteronormativity must be “repeatedly repeated” throughout life, what Cameron (2005) calls “repeated stylization.” This evokes both Butler (1990) and Pascoe (2011), who emphasize how gender must constantly be performed, as well as how boys were constructing and enacting their masculinity through heteronormativity and “fag discourse.” Cameron (2005) further elaborates, stating that heteronormativity shapes the “way gender is performed.”

Queer linguistics views all identity categories as ideological constructs “produced by social discourse.” Any identity category is problematic for it excludes anyone who does not meet the normative requirements for that category (Motschenbacher 2011). Since queer linguistics seeks to deconstruct identity categories, it is inherently a political and radical practice. Rather than focusing on the term identity, Bucholtz and Hall (2004) use the term “intersubjectivity” to demonstrate how the subject is both an agent and a patient who is subject to social processes.

Bodies

O’Neill and Dua (2017) discuss captivity – a feeling of being “tethered.” Captivity affects entire populations; it demands a response; it allows us to recognize structural violence. In *Undoing Border Imperialism*, Walia (2013) interrogates discursive and embodied borders, including their ‘social construction and structures of affect,’ revealing how we are hierarchically stratified. Bordering practices “delineate zones of access, inclusion, and privilege.” Other structures such as heteronormativity, white supremacy, and settler colonialism, like imperialism, create discursive and embodied borders which in turn have embodied consequences. Similar to Walia’s discussion of borders, Ahmed (2017) argues that walls become necessary “because the

wrong bodies could pass through.” *Bodies thus become our tools for breaking down these walls and challenging the normative.* Can ‘captivity,’ similar to borders, be a metaphor of discourses and ideologies that hold people captive? Similar to how Tuck and Yang (2012) show us that colonization should never be reduced to a metaphor, neither should captivity. From material confinement and oppression comes internalized forms of trauma and containment. ‘Captivity’ as a metaphor cannot necessarily encompass the same kind of psychic entrapment that O’Neill and Dua (2017) describe. Rather, this work aligns more with Walia’s (2013) interrogation of discursive and embodied borders, describing the consequences of these borders, and how LGBTI people challenges these borders in various ways.

Raha (2017) expands upon the material and psychological aspects of brokenness that result from embodied consequences of these structures. She politicizes “our sense of feeling” as a social injustice that must be transformed. Liberalisms within contemporary neoliberal capitalism ensure certain “poor, trans, and queer people” are granted some legal rights as labor but “with a cost.” In addition, identity checks disproportionately affect “people of color and trans and gender-nonconforming people.” Raha qualifies her own and others’ “transfeminine bodies” as antinormative bodies and the precarity of such antinormative bodies.

Kinship in the Nepali Language

Kinship terms, such as brother, sister, mother, and father, are very common in Nepal. They often replace individual’s names as a term of address and reference, and they are widely applied to non-kin as well (Sinha, Sarma, & Purkayastha 2012). Turin (2001) theorizes that the widespread use of kinship terminology in Nepal provides “context-free and socially-neutral” ways of addressing outsiders and strangers. Furthermore, Upadhyay (2003) argues that in sociolinguistics, kinship address terms are important because of their value as a “linguistic tool

speakers use to establish their identity and construct relationship between them.” Kinship terms encode honorificity. Upadhyay explains that address terms are picked based on the assumed age difference between addressee and addressor. The kinship terms are gendered – *bhaai* (younger brother), *daai* (older brother), *bahini* (younger sister), and *didi* (older sister).

Research / Findings

After coding everything, these themes emerged out of each individual’s life story and lived experiences – the local/global nexus of LGBTI-related language, how they came to understand themselves, how others understand them, how their experiences relate to Nepali cultures and customs, and their relation to space.

LGBTI-related Language

Kinship Terms

As I began interviewing participants, I quickly realized the gender and sexuality are conceived of differently in Nepal. In Nepali, *laingik* is used to refer to sexuality, and *gender* and *lingi* can be used for both gender and sex. In my first interviews when I asked, some participants would respond with one or the other (what we would understand as gender or sexuality), so it seemed as if there was no distinction. Some of the participants did not even understand either of the words to begin with.

My first few interviews were in English, and those participants were familiar with LGBTI-related terminology; however, my first interviewee in Nepali was less familiar. When I interviewed my first Nepali speaker, I found out that a way to ask for gender – instead of using the uncommon term for ‘gender’ in Nepali, I asked if they are *daai* (दाइ older brother), *didi* (दिदी older sister), or *arko* (other). Relating back to the common usage of kinship terminology

in Nepal, it was helpful to ask to better understand how they conceptualize their gender, along with how I could respectfully refer to them when interacting with them.

When I began asking if they identify as *daai*, *didi*, *ki arko*, it was much easier for participants to understand, and each one was able to quickly respond with what they prefer. It reminded me of asking for people's pronouns in the US – since Nepali is not a heavily gendered language (even the most common third person singular formal pronoun *wahaã*), the use of kinship terms is gendered and more frequently used as honorifics and with non-kin. I am not related to any of the participants, but each one easily told me which kinship term to use for them. For example, when I asked Participant R, they quickly responded *bhaai* (younger brother), which was interesting since they are much older than me.

Some interviewees expressed safety and comfort in the ability to use kinship terms. For example, one participant who identifies as a bisexual woman, is able to bring their girlfriend home; though their family only thinks the girlfriend is a very good friend, she gets along well with the family, and the mother even calls her 'daughter.' Though they are not able to display affection in front of the family, having the label of 'daughter' provides them some safety and allows the family to be more accepting of the girlfriend.

However, for others, kinship terms can pose problems. Participant C feels more comfortable living in Lalitpur than back home since in their hometown, "everyone knew [them] as a daughter." This means that in the hometown, people would use terms like 'daughter' and 'sister' to refer to them, whereas being away provides them more space to be referred to with different kinship terms.

Gender and Sexuality Terminology in Nepali

Regardless of whether my participants spoke English or not, I asked them about gender and sexuality-related terms in Nepali, specifically those for gender and sexual minorities. Many respondents told me that no such terminology existed, and several expressed frustration regarding how to express their identities and desires. In Damak, I interviewed Participant H in Nepali, and they did not know a word for how to describe their attraction to women; they were frustrated because they had only recently realized their desires after being married to a man, and now that they do realize their attractions, they can't find the words in their language beyond describing the gender that they are attracted to. They even asked me why they are attracted to women. Though many knew words, there was not necessarily consensus on each term's meaning. For example, Participant C said *tesro lingi* and *gay* mean the same, whereas most other participants differentiated between them.

As pointed out in Mahato (2017), other terms exist around Nepal to refer to gender and sexual minority individuals. The only participant to mention any of them was Participant O, but they have "never heard them being used." Of those who were able to share any terms in Nepali, most said that all the terms were offensive and used as slurs and insults only. For example, in one participant's opinion, *hijra* can be used to describe intersex people, but it is often said in a condescending way. A participant who identifies as *tesro lingi* and another who identifies as transgender, said another word that has the same meaning is *chhakka*, but it is a "very bad word...like an insult." Participant K, who identifies as a transman, also cited *chhakka* and *hijada* as words with very negative connotations. They also note that people still "use these names even today. It is very stressful in the village" since more people in the village than in their current home in Itahari use these derogatory terms towards them. Participant X, who identifies as a gay

man, said that there are also derogatory words for gay. These participants also explained that others used these derogatory words towards them as they were in school and growing up, further adding to the negative experiences and connotations with such terms.

Third/Other/Trans Gender

Many participants were familiar with terms such as third gender, other gender, and transgender. Several even discussed how the federal government recognizes the ‘other’ identity and includes it as a choice on passports. Many of the participants were familiar with the identity *tesro lingi*, which translates to ‘third gender.’ For the respondents who mentioned it, though, the inclusion of the ‘other’ category is not enough and is not inclusive. Participant V, who has “Other” listed on their passport, calls it a “discrimination card” and says that the government does not protect those who identify as “Other” from any sort of discrimination.

Participant W told me they identify as transgender, *she male*, *lady boy*, and *tesro lingi*. They tell many people they are “transgender” because most people in Nepal “don’t know what is gender still.” They clarify that people also do not know what *she male* and *lady boy* are either. They had a breast surgery, but choose not to have gender reassignment surgery on their genitals. Thus, they explain, they identify with *she male* and *lady boy*. Rather than explain, it is easier for them to simply say that they are transgender. I asked if there were words in Nepali that better suit their identity, and they replied, “*Tesro lingi, samalingi*.” For them, Nepali people more easily know what *tesro lingi* is. *Samalingi*, which roughly translates to same gender/sex, can refer to homosexuality, but it was not a common term I heard among my participants. Since this respondent identifies as *tesro lingi*, a gender category outside of the binary, it was difficult to understand what *samalingi* would mean for them; however, since gender and sexuality are not

necessarily conceived of in the same way and often overlap, it seemed more straightforward for the respondent.

Identifying as a transgender man, Participant K explains that they “consider [themselves] a boy,” especially since they “like girls.” Their partner, Participant A, explains that Participant K faces many problems because they “dress like a boy, cut [their] hair.” For Participant K, to express their transgender identity, they still align in the gender binary. Participant K does not speak English, but never mentioned identifying as *tesro lingi*. Similarly, Participant R told me they identify as *bhaai* (brother), but never used the words *transgender* or *tesro lingi*. They explain that “that [were] always like a boy. No matter how much my parents beat me up, my behavior did not change...If I am not like a girl, no one can force me.” From their explanation, they have always been *bhaai*, regardless of social and familial pressures. Furthermore, being a girl or boy involves *behaving* like one, relying on socially constructed gender roles and behaviors.

Another participant, Participant D, who identifies as a transgender woman, explained that they are “lucky because we have the characteristics of both men and women...this is God’s blessing.” In their understanding, being transgender does not fall into the binary understanding of gender, nor does it fall outside the binary as a separate category/identity. It allows for fluidity, having the abilities of men and women. The examples they provide of gendered activities, such as plowing or working in the house, are gendered forms of labor in Nepal based on what they are explaining, but either gender would hypothetically be capable of such activities; being transgender, however, allows one to engage in either of the activities, even though they identify as a transgender woman.

Participant O complicated the relationship between transgender and *tesro lingi*. They identify as a transgender woman, and they claim that *tesro lingi* individuals see themselves “as distinctive from being a man and being a woman.” They believe being a transgender woman “means being a part of the woman spectrum.” The other participant who identifies as a transgender woman, Participant D, articulated an identity that allowed one to have characteristics and abilities of men and women, rather than a distinct third identity; however, this participant only sees themselves as a woman. Furthermore, participant W did not make a distinction either between transgender and *tesro lingi*, and rather used them interchangeably (and would only switch between transgender and *tesro lingi* based on the addressee’s native language). The participants with these identities conceive of them differently, even though all of them live or have lived in Kathmandu and work with large, well-known LGBTI rights organizations. However, Participant O expressed frustrations about stigmatization they face from people who identify as third gender; because third gender individuals have more visibility in the eyes of the state, people who identify as *tesro lingi*, according to Participant O, want people who identify as transgender to also embrace the ‘third gender’ identity to gain more visibility in society.

Even though Participant O strictly identifies as a transgender woman, they have a passport with the O/Other gender marker. They explained that they “have no choice” because the O passport is the only way to choose a name other than their birth name. Furthermore, with the O passport and O citizenship, one can change their birth name. Though they had the “space to change my birth name and now I use my own preferred name,” they still find the choice “problematic.” They explain that the other categories M and F are still “stereotypically cis normative.” Thus, to be able to use their preferred name, and to have that be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the state, they must engage in an identity politics that does not suit their actual

identity, and in fact, contradicts their own understandings of self. In other words, they have to fit a certain narrative to be seen as “legitimate,” even if that narrative and identity does not fit their own.

Participant C, who identifies as a man and a lesbian, said that transgender is “a bad word” for them; not that the word itself has a negative connotation, but rather, they are offended when being called transgender since they understand themselves as a man.

Identity Language form the Global North

Some participants were familiar with and identify with identity language from the global north, such as *LGBTI*, *lesbian*, and *transgender*, perhaps since similar words in Nepali do not have positive connotations for them. As already mentioned, many identify as *transgender*, refusing to identify with the available identities/terminologies that exist in the Nepali language and society. Many of the activists knew all the terms in the acronym LGBTI, though all did not. Many explained that they had never heard of any terms in either Nepali or English until coming to LGBTI organizations. For example, Participant F, who identifies as a bisexual woman, did not know terms like ‘bisexual’ and ‘lesbian.’ One time when they were with another woman, someone asked if they were “les,” and, not knowing the vocabulary or slang, thought the man was saying ‘lays’ as in ‘Lays potato chips’; so they responded, “Lays? Lays? Do we look like a potato?!”

Only two participants mentioned A or Q (“also plus something something something”) as being part of the acronym, but both explained that neither is common. Participant S identifies as a *lesbian*, though they are somewhat unsure because they are in a relationship with a *transgender male*. Though Participant S does not speak English, all the identity terms they used are from the global north. Similarly, Participant C only speaks Nepali, yet they identify as *lesbian*.

When I asked Participant O if most people in Nepal know terms like transgender, they responded, “No...because it’s English and...a lot of people [do not] study English.” They later explain that LGBTI terms “were brought 10 years ago” through activist efforts, particularly those of Blue Diamond Society. They expressed frustration, though, that “we are stuck in LGBTI and...there isn’t something that’s beyond,” and that “many trans people” do not want to associate themselves with this terminology. They were referring to pressures to identify as *tesro lingi*, though the T refers to transgender in the acronym. Regardless, though this umbrella term is common in activist efforts and LGBTI-related organizations in Nepal, for many, it is not inclusive enough and needs to be expanded just as in the global north. Furthermore, many older people who belong to the LGBTI movement in Nepal acknowledge gender fluidity and diverse sexual orientations, there exists an “established structure inside the movement” that does not allow for other diverse understandings.

Most of the gender and sexual minority rights advocacy organizations are thus using terms from the global north to gain rights, visibility, and support. Participant D says they speak “on behalf...of those friends of the [LGBTI] community who cannot speak for themselves.” They discuss *homophobia* in their community, using the English word in our Nepali interview, since this term does not exist in Nepali. Therefore, to educate and advocate, they have to further rely on global north terms, such as *homophobia*, to be able to even address the challenges and discrimination that they experience in their communities. In addition, when conducting advocacy work, Participant F also expressed how they use global north terms in trainings and lessons, saying that, at the intense training, they “always talk about LGBTI community, LGBTI community, LGBTI community” over and over so that participants understand.

Some participants learned about these words and identities exclusively through global north sources, including Participant X, who had previously only heard slurs in Nepali. They are 19 years old and do not do activist work with major LGBTI rights organizations in Nepal; though they are aware of these organizations' work, it is not where they obtained their information or knowledge of other genders and sexualities. Participant X, just as Participant O, said that most people in their generation "are mostly influenced by Western culture...mostly British and American," meaning they are learning about gender and sexuality from the global north and in English.

Indigeneity and Gender/Sexuality Terminology in Nepal Bhasa

One participant, Participant O, expressed challenges of language and identity cross-linguistically. They primarily speak to being an Indigenous person dealing with the hegemony of the Nepali state and the privileging of the Nepali language. Their language is Nepal Bhasa, which differs from Nepali. They explain that there "is so much history to do with that suppressions on Indigenous peoples," such as being arrested if "caught speaking our native language." They take pride in their Indigeneity and gender identities, but they expressed frustration because they "[were] not being able to express LGBTI stuffs in my native language." They explain that they had to rely on English words.

While other conceptions of gender and sexual identity exists in stories their elders had told them, the stories were not written; furthermore, they seem to be dying as older generations are dying since they were not allowed to speak their language in public or learn it in schools. Stories and knowledges are dying with older speakers.

Participant O identifies as a transgender woman, but such a word did not exist in Nepal Bhasa that they were aware of. And in Nepali, *tesro lingi* does not suit the way they identify and

understand themselves. To alleviate the lack of terminology in their language, they decided to write a book with terminology that can be used to express concepts related to gender and sexuality in their language. With the help of one linguist, they were able to gain basic understandings of the grammatical structure of their native language and the many dialects that exist. Furthermore, they looked for “more traditionally and historically prevalent terms” in old books and inscriptions in their language to develop more modern and “beautiful” terminology. Some of the words were inspired or borrowed from English words, but none from Nepali words; they cite the hegemony of the Nepali language as a reason why it did not influence their choices and why they chose to only publish the book in Nepal Bhasa and English only. For example, they borrowed the English words for *queer* and *drag*.

Because of language suppression, they express that many young people “do not speak their own native language.” They see it as “very necessary” to bring these new terminologies into existence, accessible to younger populations and to encourage them to learn their native language. Participant O is 19 years old, and they, along with younger populations in their indigenous community, find information on gender and sexuality from the internet, particularly “google searches.” They even expressed interest in creating a YouTube video with these terms in their native language to further spread these terms to younger populations of their community. While it might be difficult for all speakers in the community to pick it up quickly, they did say that “people who are involved in language activism” are “very happy with having [these] terms” and that “they do use that terms.”

Since identities are complex and carry cultural connotations and contexts, it can be difficult to translate certain identities. Regarding the new terms, I asked Participant O to clarify how they were translated and about cultural connotations that might become lost in translation.

Participant O had essentially taken global north terms and put those terms in their own language, carrying the global north connotations with them. They explain, “I think it was important for me to express those connotations in my own language, so I think it’s...more like...putting the terminologies in English into my own language.” They recall oral stories about “men getting married” and one of a “woman [who] had a dick.” But their elders told them these stories as a kid, did not write them down, and the elders have since died. And the content in these stories still do not encompass the range of sexual and gender minority identities and experiences, so Participant O had to rely on global north terminologies and understandings. For them, these terms are powerful and empowering, and they have brought these global north understandings into their own culture and language as a way to revitalize the dying language and help empower younger generations.

Understanding Self

The participants differ greatly in how they came to understand themselves, their desires, and their identities. Many of them learned more about LGBTI and gender and sexual minorities from various sources, such as organizations, newspapers, or online sources.

Participant K said they “used to consider myself a boy. I used to like girls...I was born a female but I used to feel like a boy.” While they use the past tense, now, at age 35, they still identify that way and as a transman. When referring to their partner, they say, “She is entirely a girl.”

Participant A, the partner of Participant K, explained to me that it had been 10 years since their partner “came out as a transman,” to which their partner quickly counters, “Became a transman? I was a transman since I was a child.” Even though the partner said “came out,” they interpret this as “becoming,” conflating the process of coming out as becoming and being. Rather, they have been “a transman since I was a child.”

Just as Participant K had realized at a young age, many other participants discuss understanding their desires, attractions, and even identities from a young age. Participant O, for example, “always associated [themselves] with those stereotypically feminine,” such as their teachers. As a child, they did not face much stigma because, they explain, “It was just a child so it does not matter.” In ninth grade, they found more information about the LGBTI community from Pahichan, a program run by Blue Diamond Society. As they learned more, they began volunteering in the news room for Blue Diamond Society. Simultaneously, they would go to internet cafes, using Google searches to learn more.

Another participant, Participant X, understood from a young age that they were attracted to guys. However, it took several years for them to feel comfortable and tell anyone. At first, they were attracted to someone but thought it was just friendship, later realizing that it was more. They had no one to talk to, and they watched countless “videos on YouTube” to “make sure that [they’re] not crazy.” In addition, when they were older, the app Grindr helped them meet others who identify like them.

However, others struggled to understand themselves as children, lacking terminology or examples. Even though Participant H has friends affiliated with an LGBTI rights organization, they were not familiar with any terms for their desires or identity. They expressed frustrations, especially since they did not understand that they were attracted to women until after they were married to a man.

In addition, Participant D now identifies as a transgender woman, but when they were a child, they “didn’t know anything” and would “get embarrassed,” making them scared to leave the house. These feelings continued all throughout childhood as others would tease them, leaving them “feeling[ing] embarrassed, bad, scared.” They explained they felt “unlike a man, unlike a

woman.” A friend was able to take them to a program on gender, and it was there where they realized they “[weren’t] alone” in their feelings. They said, “I realized that there were many friends like me.” To them, these complete strangers automatically are their friends. They expand, saying others in the Terai have similar feelings and thus decide to not get married, but in doing so, they receive humiliation and discrimination from their family. They say, “They themselves didn’t know the reason behind their sexual identity. So, how could they explain it to their family?”

Participant W first understood their gender when, in sixth grade, their class was starting to learn about sex and biology. This is where they first learned about attraction, and they started to realize they were attracted to guys. They questioned, “When guy touch me, [why do I] blush?” Two years later, they learned about LGBTI individuals from a newspaper article; reading it every night, it helped them understand that they were not alone, though they still chose not to tell their friends or family for several more years. Later, they heard that Blue Diamond Society wanted to do a radio interview with someone who identifies as *tesro lingi*, and they volunteered. From then, they became involved in the organization, and they encouraged their friends and family to listen to the program as a way of “coming out” to them.

Participant F did not even know that they had same-sex attraction or that they would identify as bisexual until they came to a meeting organized by Mitini Nepal. They explained that their parents only “show[ed them] the heterosexual community relations,” those “of man and of women.” At Mitini Nepal, they learned that “there are other sexual and gender relations.” It was then that they began learning more and better understanding their own desires. It also helped them better understand why they felt “so lonely” and such “emotional attachment” towards one of their best friends when she moved to the United Kingdom. Once they learned global north

terminologies to refer to sexuality, they better understood themselves and their desires. To them, these global north terms were thus empowering. Participant C explained that “in their heart they felt like they were a man,” so they would cut their hair, for example. It was difficult, though, as no resources existed in their community. However, they experienced tension from family and community organizations because they did not understand.

Hearing information from organizations like Mitini Nepal and Blue Diamond Society encouraged and allowed many to participate in the organizations and become volunteers or employees. In addition to being exposed to global north identity terminologies, visiting workshops and programs put on by LGBTI organizations in Nepal encouraged many to become involved. For example, in my focus group, Participants T, J, and B all discussed how each had friends who encouraged them to participate in workshops and programs. When Participant B went to Kathmandu to visit Mitini Nepal, they “met with other friends. I liked it.” They elaborate, “Since I was a kid, my desires and interests were like this. I liked Mitini Nepal...” Similarly, one of Participant C’s closest friends told them to come to Kathmandu and visit Mitini Nepal; they ended up going, and they brought their partner along. For them, it “felt really good” and was a good experience for them.

Bodies

Many of the participants touched on changing their bodies and outward appearances in order to express their identities and desires; the body became a site of expression, identity, and understanding, even for others who try to figure out others’ genders or identities. In particular, hair was an important site in expressing and understanding identity. Participant V said that if women have short haircuts, “hospitals and doctors...won’t provide services to lesbians.” They automatically equated short hair to lesbian identity without me prompting or asking.

Also commenting on hair, Participant T brought it up as I asked about their childhood. They said that they cut their hair, and because of that, they “didn’t go to school.” I asked why, and they responded that they “felt shy.” Their friends checked in on them, to which they responded, “I cut my hair. My dressing style, my hair all are changed.” Their friends said it did not matter and encouraged them to return to school. When they went back, others “gathered around and everyone looked at me. My god...I felt embarrassed.” Teachers reacted the same way as their peers. Their mother said that she “needed a daughter...in the house,” implying that dressing this way and cutting their hair did not make them a proper daughter. Participant T had changed their hair and style all in one day, and it completely changed their life; while they made decisions about their own bodies, they faced severe backlash and taunts from peers, teachers, and family for not behaving “properly.” Similarly, Participant B said they “dress[ed] up like this” since they were a kid, motioning to their masculine-looking clothing and short hair. They also said they “used to walk around like this,” all to which their family responded “in disbelief and disapproval.” However, they said their “family never game me any torture...I have been able to live life on my own terms.” Even with the lack of family disapproval, they still face discrimination from society at large for looking and walking in particular ways.

Their friend who was also in this focus group, Participant J, belongs to a lower class than Participant T and had a much different experience. They said, “I cut my hair. I walk like this. [My family] never say do this, do that.” Overall, they say that they “never had to face such problems,” but earlier they had to face those problems. They did not elaborate as to from whom they had these problems, but it appears that their family did not give them much trouble for changing their dress and hair. On the other hand, as a transgender woman, Participant O did not cut their hair in childhood because they “associated [themselves] with those stereotypically

feminine,” and they were able to do this because people thought that they were “just a child so it does not matter.” This contradicts the other participants who cut their hair and identify more with *daai* (brother); thus, they bring about a double standard for children in Nepal – boys have more agency and acceptance to behave feminine, but girls must strictly adhere to gender roles and behaviors, even at a young age. However, Participant O did say that later in their teenage years, one of their relatives “scolded” them very badly, and they had to stop dressing like the women and “female teachers” who they looked up to.

Participant J, who identifies as *daai* (brother), dreamed of “becoming a singer.” However, their teacher “used to make me sing songs of girls,” which they did not like. The same thing happened when they learned to play guitar – they were told to sing in a “girl’s voice.” Their teachers would always “reject my choice of songs.” As they auditioned for reality shows, they were again told that they “should sing in a girl’s voice.” Having their voice constantly policed, they face so many hurdles to be able to express their identity and pursue their dream.

Participant D, who identifies as a transgender woman, said that when they were seven years old, people in the community would tease them, saying, “Why did his body become like this? He was born a boy so how did his body become this way?” They did not expand as to how their body was different at that age, and I decided not to ask further given the sensitivity of the topic. Similarly, Participant W expressed similar taunts from people; they said, “I am a guy at that time but...I have breast[s] like a girl.” This led to discrimination and assaults when they were a migrant laborer in Qatar, forcing them to come back to Nepal. Because of the money they owed since they came back early, and because of their body, they became a dancer and sex worker as few other options existed. With a non-normative body, they thus expressed how bodies exist in globalized settings – facing discriminations at home and abroad, having to move because

of their bodily discriminations, and turning to some of the only work that exists for non-normative bodies. In fact, they said that it was “not okay to sell my body,” but they had to to earn money and “support my family.” Participant R wanted to wear “half pants to school,” but they were not allowed for girls; they were forced to “wear skirts to school” because they had “no other option.” They say, “I didn’t agree.” Overall, through their bodies, many participants experienced challenges and discrimination as they did not conform to societal gender and sexual expectations; as they experienced societal and familial expectations through their bodies, they all found agency in various ways as to expressing themselves and their identities.

Discrimination and Refusal to Understand

While the body was one site through which others worked to understand LGBTI identities, other ways of understanding emerged, particularly others simply refusing to listen or learn about LGBTI lives and identities. Participant D expresses frustration, saying “There are many men and women who dislike us. Even when we try to teach them, they don’t want to learn, they don’t want to listen.” Similarly, Participant B says, “Not everyone is okay with our interests and desires.” When working in Qatar, Participant W said people at the construction site where they worked would “bitch at me, pulling my leg...they harass me.” They had similar experiences in school in Nepal, where peers were also “bitching me” and “teachers beat me.” They say people in society view their identity, *tesro lingi*, with judgment. Others “have a problem” if they are seen in public with anyone. These and similar experiences lead many to become shy. For example, Participant D says they are “scared about what [my family] might say about me.” They say that LGBTI people “face blame and humiliation” which other “males and females don’t have to face.” Also, Participant F expresses fear of coming out to their family, saying, “I am scared... I

know so many stories..." of things going wrong when other LGBTI people come out to their families.

While not everyone might act poorly towards LGBTI people, Participant O calls some people "back biters" – people who "in front they are 'oh wow'" and accepting, then "behind they are 'Oh oh this person is *this* was'" and are judgmental. Participant D shared similar remarks, saying, "Other people used to backbite about us. But nobody said anything to me in my face."

While not everyone might have such a harsh reaction, Participant F says most community and families "did not easily accept their sexuality," and it is very difficult "to fight with family because [of] emotional attachment." Many associate other identities, particularly transgender identities, with prostitution, since many work in "Thamel and Rana Park" doing this work. Furthermore, Participant X argues that legislators "don't want to make the time" to understand LGBTI issues.

Other participants, such as Participant H, face little discrimination because "no one knows"; however, this also means they do not openly share their identities or desires with others. In addition, some people do not understand their identities since the terms are in English and are not common in Nepal. For example, Participant O says, "No...young people who know English understand what [transgender] means," but most other people do not. Participant X also said that most people would not know what *gay* is if you said it to them.

Kinship terms are also used when others are trying to understand and figure out what gender someone is. In my focus group interview, they were discussing how they face many difficulties "in public vehicles...and public toilets." All the participants in the focus group identify as *daai/bhaai* (brother). People will stare and laugh. For example, some of the seats on the bus are for women and others are for men. One participant said that others will say, "*Bhaai*

you can't sit there. It's for females," before they realize and correct, "It's not a *bhaai*. It's a *bahini*." This example of an interaction shows how important bodies and outward appearance are in Nepali culture, how they index gender, and how non-kin use kinship terms even when not trying to remain polite. A similar situation will happen when they use the restroom when the bus stops. One time, to avoid the situation of crowded bathrooms and new strangers, they chose to walk into the jungle to use the restroom instead. Public spaces in buses and restrooms are hostile. Similarly, Participant K, who identifies as a *transman*, expressed concerns about using restrooms, saying it "is confusing as to whether to use men's or ladies' toilet" because of fear of what others will say.

One day, I was with Participants B and Z, along with Participant Z's family. When Participant Z's family saw Participant B, who from my understanding identifies as a man, they called them *bahini* (younger sister). Participant B did not seem to mind. Perhaps, as pointed out in previous examples, this is because gender and sexual minorities frequently experience this misgendering when people refer to them using kinship terms. In fact, in my focus group interview with Participants B, Z, T, and J, all the participants preferred *daai/bhaai* (brother) for kinship reference; however, Participants T and B told me not to call them that in society because they "will be embarrassed. They will tease us." Participant T expands, saying, "We need society to survive. So, we have to be careful of them also." While they prefer certain kinship terms, they also face societal and cultural pressures; so while they don't identify with *didi/bahini* (sister) kinship terms, in order to survive, they do not correct other people in society if they are called that.

Participant C touched on how others try to understand their identity, especially since they have shorter hair and do not have a husband. Others believe that they are "depressed" and

“mentally ill.” It does not really bother them, though, because in their heart, they know they are not mentally ill. When they have had partners, people just think it is just a close friend – a *didi/bahini* (sister) rather than a partner. Furthermore, they cite not having a “nose piercing” as a reason why people are confused about their identity. Because of the nose ring and short hair, they explain that people in the past, people would not drink the water that Participant C gave them because they saw it as “unclean” and “untouchable,” as if someone from a lower caste was giving it to them. Participant C, however, belongs to the upper Brahmin caste.

Participant D explains how LGBTI people face so much discrimination in society. “We are at risk of HIV every day. We are victims of violence every day. People have had to die. People slander us. People accuse us of lying, stealing, even if we haven’t done so.” Furthermore, at the governmental level, politicians will “say something and...do something else.” Many claim to support LGBTI efforts, but then do nothing to actually protect them. Participant D thus expands these participants’ daily microaggressions and linguistic violence to serious issues – issues of life, death, and physical violence with lack of support. Participant W expands this, saying there is discrimination everywhere – movie halls, immigration offices, parties, jobs, and with police. “Every time, every day, every minute.” While Nepal’s new 2015 Constitution might be “good,” the “implementing part was not so good,” according to Participant F. In fact, almost all participants told me that their lives had not changed since the new Constitution came into effect – they still experience the same discrimination and challenges. Nothing has changed.

Of course, the amount of discrimination varies based on identities, expressions, and appearance. Overall, though, Participant V says that LGBTI people in general “remain very poor because of lack of opportunities.” Many are led to look for work abroad, though if someone has “Other” as their gender on their passport, they say it will not be possible to find a job abroad.

Furthermore, Participant V says that international organizations, such as the United Nations, only support the “G” in “LGBTI.”

Heteronormativity in Nepal

In addition to the hetero- and gender-normative experiences regarding bodies, hair, clothes and other practices, many of the participants brought up customs that speak to larger heteronormative expectations and discourses in Nepali society, such as marriage. Participant J told me, overall, “Our Nepali culture. Our culture does not accept LGBTI people...For years, we were living by killing our desires because of the Nepali culture and tradition.” They find no acceptance in Nepali society, only amongst themselves and the LGBTI friends and spaces. Furthermore, LGBTI spaces, such as Mitini Nepal, provide spaces for social gatherings for important holidays that often have gendered and heteronormative connotations and practices, such as Teej and Holi, according to Participants W and F.

Families police their children’s behaviors and dress, according to Participant W, specifically what they wear and with whom they go out. Many participants brought up their families encouraging, and in most cases pressuring, them to be married off. For example, Participant D shared how their family married them when there around 18 or 20 years old; though “life is full of dilemmas,” they are no longer married. They say that it is the same case with other LGBTI people who live in the Terai – they “are married by their families,” and many of them go along with it because if they do not, people will “humiliate them, discriminate against them.”

As already mentioned, families play an important role for people in Nepali society. In fact, many of the participants still live with their parents and other family members. Participant F shared with me about how their family only exposed them to “the heterosexual community

relations” of one man and one woman. None of the participants said anything contradictory; no one shared about their family exposing them to non-heteronormative relations or ideas.

Participant O noted the same “cis normative and heteronormative understandings” being present on the internet.

Since Nepali people rely on their families so much, they face pressure to participate in heteronormative relations; if not, they risk “getting abandoned” by their families, according to Participant X. Economic factors in particular prohibit participants such as Participant X from being honest with their families about their sexualities. They say, “You have to rely on family for *everything*.” In their opinion, going abroad to work somewhere like Germany or the United States provide them with more money, meaning they would not have to rely on their family for financial support and then could afford to come out.

Participants in the focus group expressed desires to provide skill based training programs for more employment opportunities such as driving training and beautician training, but they lack the funding and skills to put on the programs. For more economic opportunities and to support their families, many Nepali people take jobs in the Middle East as migrant workers. Participant H was married before realizing their identity, and with their husband in Dubai, they now have more space to understand themselves and their desires. For others, such as Participant W, engaging in migrant work was very harmful and exposed them to more linguistic and physical violence. Some participants, such as Participants F and S, made their own businesses with the support of their other LGBTI friends; neither was able to “get any financial support” from their friends, so they took small loans from friends.

Space

The concept of space was vital in all my interviews. Both physical and online spaces provided participants with varying levels of challenges, pressures, and empowerment. In particular, respondents said that LGBTI organizations' spaces are vital for their advocacy, meetings, and lives. Participant D describes how people have been "kicked out of their homes" for their identities and desires, and organizational spaces thus become important for those with no home and no support. For participant W, every space except for their apartment and Mitini Nepal's program center are hostile. They explain, "I feel so good when I come [to the center] because I find my second family over here who care for me, who support me." These organizations provide space for LGBTI individuals, even in times of natural disasters; Participant F shares how when the earthquake hit Nepal in 2015, their organization provided space and tents for LGBTI people since it is "difficult being LGBTI people and staying in some of the public places." Furthermore, as Participant C points out, these organizations sometimes provide transportation to come to parties and meetings.

All participants in my focus group – T, J, B, and Z – expressed the urgency of having an office to conduct their meetings and work. As of right now, they do not have an office, and have to meet in tea shops or hotels, and one time they "even met in the jungle." With no office, it is hard to coordinate, organize, talk, have a safe space, and importantly, conduct programs with and for the community. When I met with them, we met in a tea shop that had a private room, but we were interrupted multiple times and at some points, participants would lower their voices. They insist that by not being able to hold the interview in the office, we wasted time by having to find a tea shop.

Many participants touched on how public spaces are often hostile for LGBTI people, including public restrooms, buses, schools, and for many, simply walking anywhere. For Indigenous peoples, and particularly LGBTI Indigenous peoples, public spaces became hostile when it became illegal to speak languages other than Nepali in public; other knowledges, stories, and histories of other gender and sexual identities, as Participant O argues, began to disappear as elders could not use public spaces in the community any more to tell these stories; these stories moved into private-only spaces.

In Itahari, my participants also did not have an office; rather, I had to conduct interviews with them at the Blue Diamond Society center. One of my participants owns their own clothing store, which I spent significant time in while I was there. Throughout the day, other LGBTI people would stop in the store – ones that I had interviewed and others which I had not. As people would visit, they would sit, drink tea, and hang out. I saw how this one random, small clothing store instantly became a safe space and supportive for LGBTI people, specifically those who did not have their own office. At one point, a group of LGBTI individuals came in, and one was badly hurt and had been to the hospital. They were asking the store's owner what to do. The interaction showed not only the physical violence and discrimination that LGBTI people face in Nepal, but also the ways LGBTI people must find support amongst themselves in safe spaces as none other spaces seem to exist. In my interviews, though, none of them even mentioned the store or seeking safety or comfort there.

Online spaces became vital for many participants to learn more about themselves, realize they are not alone, and interact with others. Participant O would visit “cyber cafes” to access computers and used Google to find out more about gender and sexuality beyond the “cis-normative and heteronormative understandings” they received from their parents. However,

through Google searches, they were also exposed to content discussing how being LGBTI “is sin,” how they need to undergo “corrective therapies,” and other oppressive content. While finding internet sources was empowering, there was also content that was harmful. Similarly, Participant F used Yahoo to find out more about the meaning of LGBTI. They also used Google to better understand bisexuality. While it helped them better understand themselves, they also express frustration because they have to “hide my sexuality” on social media since they are connected with their family on those platforms.

Participant X used YouTube to watch videos, specifically about coming out. The videos were very important, and they told me, “I felt I’m not the only one [that has these feelings].” They also use the app Grindr, where they have been able to talk and meet with people; however, people on the app have also “made me want to question my self esteem.” Regardless though, they are thankful for these connections. Participant X is 19, and they say that their generation is very “open minded...because of the internet,” and specifically, because of “memes.” They argue that the internet has thus also helped non-LGBTI individuals learn and become more inclusive. “They’re mostly influenced by Western culture.” Participant O expressed similar sentiments, saying most people are getting information from the “internet...which is basically in English,” which is perhaps why identity terminology from the global north is prevalent in the contemporary movement.

Participants touched on the ways they continue to use social media and online spaces for empowering purposes. These days, Participant O runs a blog and discussion platform called Sinutok online where they and other Nepali LGBTI individuals can discuss issues and identities. In addition, Participant X uses the app Duolingo to learn other languages; for them, learning

another language will make it easier for them to travel abroad and earn money, which for them, would allow them to come out to their family.

Analysis

Demographic Connections

My participants greatly differed in terms of where they grew up, caste, age, and gender/sexual identity. Each individual had unique experiences in terms of family and community acceptance, and there did not appear to be strong correlations between the participants' level of acceptance with factors such as caste, age, or identity. Caste did not correspond to education level or experiences with family. One participant, who belongs to the Brahmin caste, for example, was forced to quit school at a young age; another participant, who belonged to the Dalit caste, had educational access but made their own choice to stop attending school because of linguistic violence. Caste appeared to correlate with ability to speak English; most of my participants who spoke English belonged to the Brahmin or Chhetri upper castes; however, this could have been due to other factors, such as geographic location. However, one participant who I interviewed in English belonged to a lower caste, and they had commented on their access to internet and its role in understanding their identity.

Overall, internet access did not positively correlate with ability to speak English, though, as most of my participants had much access to the internet. Most likely because of internet access, there were certainly generational differences between the participants. Younger participants frequently commented on the role of the internet and online spaces in their identity formations, understandings, and feelings of inclusion; they also commented on the younger generations' open-mindedness, expressing frustrations with older generations for more

heteronormative ways of thinking. Only one participant who was over 30 did comment on generational differences.

Connection to Previous Research

While some work has examined outside funding from international donors, none of my participants really mentioned international donors. In fact, most expressed frustrations in ability to engage in advocacy work because of their *lack* of funding and lack of office spaces.

International aid agencies have historically supported Blue Diamond Society's work (Mahato 2017), whereas most of my participants work for/with Mitini Nepal. Most of the activism and understandings of self that my participants described relied heavily on identity politics, just as Karki (2012) had argued that identity politics had become a vehicle of collective emancipation in Nepal.

As Bista (2012) and Chhetri (2017) argue, all of my participants touched on social exclusion, marginalization, discrimination, and 'coming out.' For many, it was not an easy decision to come out to friends and family, and still many have not; Bista (2012) says that participants who are only partially 'out' report living in frustration and anxiety; regardless of how 'out' my participants' are, every single one reported frustration and anxieties in their lives. Similarly, all expressed tensions between their own desires/identities and heteronormative social pressures from family and peers, just as Coyle and Boyce (2015) argue. Most of my participants touched on the large role the family plays in all aspects of their lives, specifically having to rely on them for economic support.

Chhetri (2017) points out the many words that exist in Nepal and in ethnic languages to denote gender and sexual minorities, but almost none of my participants knew or mentioned any of the words, regardless of where they grew up or currently live. Aside from *tesro lingi* and

LGBTI global north terminology, if my participants knew any other words for related identities, they always had derogatory connotations. None of my participants knew for certain how global north terminology became so prevalent in activist efforts, but as Mahato (2017) argues, perhaps this is because BDS had defined the community as LGBTI in their original activism. My participants similarly noted the presence of these global north terms in activist efforts, and some attribute it to the rise of the internet and younger generations' interest in 'Western' culture.

Rankin (2004) argues that Nepal embarked on neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s; Nepal began embracing private investment, tourism, and private education. Furthermore, Sharma and Phyak (2017) argue that Nepal's neoliberal structural reforms have "valorized the commodity value of English as a global language." Just as they argue, many of my participants, particularly those of the younger generation, have adopted neoliberal ideologies surrounding the importance of English, the agency it would provide in their lives, and its role in their identity formations.

Connection to Theoretical Approaches

My participants and I discussed their lives, experiences, and identities, along with the ways they are affected by Nepali culture and society. Almost everything they told me illuminated larger heteronormative discourses on a local level, national level, and international level.

Employing CDA and queer linguistic methodologies helps illuminate the intersections of language, ideology, and power. I draw on various gender, queer, and contemporary sociological theories to better understand their experiences and identities.

Queer linguistics seeks to deconstruct identity categories (Motschenbacher 2011). The terms that my participants identify with empower and constrain them in various ways.

Furthermore, their voices become attested within a specific global/local nexus in many ways.

With the neoliberalizing state and increase in English education, the LGBTI movement in Nepal

picked up global north terminology in English from the beginning, and for many participants, these words have helped them understand their desires. From a queer linguistics point of view, all identity categories are problematic. However, even among LGBTI-identifying individuals, there is no clear consensus on what these terms mean, and they have different meanings for different people. Many of the participants did not know or bring up words such as *queer*. One individual expressed confusion because they identify as a *lesbian* but are in a relationship with a *transgender male*. In addition, one participant identifies as both a *man* and a *lesbian*. These examples come from speakers who do not speak any English, yet they identify with global north terms. Most of the participants shared that Nepali words for gender and sexual minorities are often insults and have very bad connotations; rather than identify with derogatory terms, having other global identity terms that do not have such negative connotations is empowering for these participants. They thus grapple with national and international ideologies related to gender and sexuality, finding empowerment in more global concepts and ideologies. While these global identities and English were not available to all participants, most were still able to better understand their own identities and interests through these identity terms.

Younger participants expressed frustrations regarding the lack of evolving terminology in the LGBTI movement, as it leaves out words such as *queer* and room for fluidity. Identity categories produced by social discourse and in these organizations needs to be more inclusive. Because of larger social discourses, some participants expressed concerns having to fit certain narratives, which would change depending on who they speak to, showing how they are caught in a local and global nexus. For example, for Participant W, it is easier for them to say *transgender* when they are speaking to someone like me – an outsider who speaks English. However, their term for identification would change if they were speaking to a Nepali person.

Some of my participants identified as *tesro lingi*, *transgender*, both, or strictly just one. Just as Towle and Morgan (2002) problematize past and current research related to studies of *third gender* and *transgender* individuals, my participants' responses show how problematic such research would be. There was no clear consensus on what these terms meant, with some using them interchangeably and others making clear distinctions between the two. Just as Participant W shows, they even change their identifying term to fit certain narratives based on who they speak with. For some, identifying as *tesro lingi* was empowering and helpful in understanding their identities, especially since there are some political protections for these identities. Participant O feels pressure from others in the movement to identify as *tesro lingi* so they can gain more visibility, but they strictly identify only as *transgender*, challenging the applicability of *third gender* categories. Given the lack of consistency in understandings of LGBTI identities in Nepal, it would be problematic to simply study *third gender*, especially since my participants' experiences were so varied. For Participant D, their identity as *transgender* does not fall into a binary understanding of gender, nor does it fall outside the binary as a separate identity; their explanation allows for fluidity, having the abilities of both men and women. Thus, employing *third gender/transgender*-specific studies could easily have left out the varying experiences and identities that gender minority individuals face in Nepal.

As Foucault (1978) asserts, "Where there is resistance, there is power." All of my participants are resisting normative discourses and identities in Nepali society, and almost all are involved in LGBTI activist organizations around the country. Their existence and resistance proves they are caught in larger heteronormative and patriarchal power structures. They face struggles in all aspects of their lives – growing up, attending schools, advocating, facing a lack of safe spaces, experiencing physical and linguistic violence and discrimination. They thus must

resist heteronormativity in all aspects of their lives – they *live* in these structures. As Participant J points out, “Nepali culture...does not accept LGBTI people...For years, we were living by killing our desires because of the Nepali culture and tradition.”

As every single participant noted facing hostility in public spaces, Participants T, J, B, and Z all touched on the urgency of needing an office to conduct their work, meetings, and community engagement. Especially for younger participants, the internet provided safe spaces for understanding and expressing themselves; As Fraser (1990, 2014) theorizes, these marginalized participants rely on and create subaltern counter-public spaces to engage in resistant, non-heteronormative discussions that are ordinarily delegitimized and excluded in public spheres. Participant O discusses dealing with the hegemony of the Nepali language; the way Indigenous peoples, their languages, and their histories have been hurt or erased by linguistic hegemony. They resist by creating their own terms and relying on subaltern counter-public spaces online. They are caught in larger, hegemonic power structures that contradict their own culture’s understandings, or past understandings, of gender and sexuality.

Phenomenology emphasizes lived experiences, and queer phenomenology examines horizons, spaces, and heteronormativity of ‘straight time’ (Ahmed 2006). Taking Ahmed’s advice, I looked at their lived experiences and meaningful deviations from the norms – deviations such as their bodies and refusal to participate in ‘straight time.’ None of my participants discussed staying on ‘straight time.’ In fact, most talk about pressures to conform to straight time, specifically getting married. Many expressed feelings of discomfort and disorientation by not meeting societal and familial pressures to engage in straight, heteronormative time. Some participants were essentially disowned from their families by refusing to be married or engage in straight time. One participant, before realizing their desires,

did (and does) participate in straight time; they got married but now struggle to understand themselves, and they express discomfort in having to continue to participate. Another participant was on straight time, as their parents had only shown them “the heterosexual community relations,” those “of man and of women.” Though they identify as bisexual, they still hide their identity from their family, as their family still pressures them to participate in straight time and do not understand why one would not.

Many participants expressed moments of what Muñoz (2013) calls disidentification. Minority individuals use disidentification as a survival strategy to negotiate “majoritarian public spheres” that punish the existence of people “who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.” Almost all participants noted negotiating between their identities and socially encoded roles “that are available for such subjects.” Because there are not necessarily fixed or stereotypical queer identities in Nepal, most participants discussed negotiating with gender- and heteronormative identities/citizenship. Disidentification for them is a strategy for both resistance and survival. Participant O, for example, identifies as transgender but holds an “Other [gender]” citizenship and passport. Though they strongly reject the other/*tesro lingi* identity, they had to disidentify and obtain “other” as a sole means of being able to change their name on their documents. They must engage in identity politics that do not suit their actual identity in order to be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the state. It was a survival strategy, and they had to negotiate between the few identities that are available to them.

In addition, Participant B identifies as *daai/bhaai* (brother), but they did not react or seem to mind when they were misgendered and called *bahini* (sister) instead. Even though it is not how they identify, they must negotiate their reaction as a survival strategy in a gender-normative society. In fact, Participants T and B told me not to call them *daai/bhaai* in society because they

would be “embarrassed” and others will “tease” them. They speak to their disidentification, saying, “We need society to survive. So, we have to be careful of them also.” They face societal and cultural pressures to conform, and they must carefully navigate all their daily interactions. Similarly, Participant X says that in Nepal, one “[has] to rely on family for *everything*.” They are not out to their family, so they cannot be open and correctly identify themselves in front of their family; instead they must disidentify around their family to survive because otherwise, they could be punished or disowned.

Relating to theories of captivity (O’Neill and Dua 2017), borders (Walia 2013), and walls (Ahmed 2017), all participants’ responses allude to discursive and embodied borders regarding their gender, sexuality, language, and/or bodies. Bordering practices “delineate zones of access, inclusion, and privilege,” while oppressive structures create discursive and embodied borders (Walia 2013). In Nepali society, as these participants point out, these borders have consequences – difficulty in understanding themselves, internal conflicts, discrimination. Because these gender- and heteronormative borders invade all aspects of daily life in Nepal, it was difficult for Participant C, for example, to understand themselves. They felt like they were a man in their heart and cut their hair, but no resources existed in their community as they were growing up.

As Zimman and Hall (2009) argue, attention to bodies is “crucial for understanding gender variance” and experiences since it is often “the combination of apparently incongruous social and biological gender cues”; bodies are “imbued with meaning through discourse.” Like Participant C, others cut their hair, took out their nose rings, and faced backlash and confusion; by changing their bodies and not conforming with gender- and heteronormative roles, they challenged bodily borders. By cutting their hair, for Participants T and B, they experienced “disapproval” from their families and discrimination from society. Bodies become tools for

breaking down walls and challenging the normative. “Every time, every day, every minute” they experience discrimination, no matter where they go. After changing their bodies and breaking these borders, they are under constant surveillance. Bodies are thus tools for breaking borders, but many do not even have a choice – their body simply *is*. Participant W touched on how their non-normative body exists in globalized settings – they face discrimination at home and abroad, they had to move because of their bodily discriminations, and they had to turn to some of the only work (sex work) that exists for non-normative bodies in Nepal. Neoliberalism and globalization reinforce these bodily borders, making it difficult to challenge and break down both nationally and internationally. For these participants, these bodily borders delineated their access to certain jobs and spaces, along with how much privilege they held in each situation.

Bordering practices could also extend to the linguistic borders these participants face. In Nepali, kinship terminologies help construct and express identities, but these kinship terminologies are also gendered. Linguistic and discursive borders exist for many of the participants – many faced difficulties being able to express or understand their identities and desires because of the lack of vocabulary (and understandings) in their language. For many, the only language available to them had such negative connotations, and many began embracing outside global north identity terminologies as the LGBTI movement was forming in Nepal. The lack of terminologies in the Nepali language thus delineates zones of inclusion and privilege; if no terminology exists, there would be no inclusion. These linguistic and discursive borders thus had significant consequences on participants’ lives as they struggled to understand themselves and as they still face discrimination in their daily lives.

Conclusion / Theorizing Futures

In all aspects of life in Nepal, LGBTI people face challenges and discrimination. A lack of awareness and understandings in Nepal, and a lack of terminology in the Nepali language, has allowed for the rise of LGBTI-related global north terminology for identification. Along with trying to understand themselves, their desires, and their identities, they have also created safe, LGBTI-friendly spaces as none exist in other areas in society. In Nepali, kinship terminology has both helped and harmed society's way of understanding their identities. Some were able to create these spaces and empower themselves by starting their own businesses. Overall, their understandings and experiences with the gender and sexual identities intersect with their language ability, access to other languages, Indigeneity, caste, and location.

My participants were so eager and sweet to share their life stories, experiences, and identities with me. But hearing their experiences was not easy. They shared about the constant insults. The constant discrimination. The constant laughs, spit, jokes. The constant pressures to conform. The constant fear. The constant battles. The constant lack of safe spaces. Not to mention the constant political and social pressures. The constant economic pressures. The constant Nepali cultural pressures. The constant family pressures. The constant peer pressures. The constant desires to simply breath and survive. Through the torture, pressures, pains, they shared about their countless persistence. The *need* to persist. No one stopped at themselves – they must persist for *others*.

In a heteronormative, neoliberal and globalizing state, the LGBTI people I met found ways to counter these oppressive systems and form more inclusive, radical communities and support systems. Finding creative and radical ways of existing within such systems, while simultaneously working against and beyond such structures. At every turn, the neoliberal state

and social norms try to break them down – their spirits, their bodies, their hope. In their piece “Transfeminine Brokenness, Radical Transfeminism,” Nat Raha (2017) expands upon the material and psychological aspects of brokenness that result from embodied consequences of gender- and heteronormative structures. Liberalisms within contemporary neoliberal capitalism ensure certain “poor, trans, and queer people” are granted some legal rights as labor but “with a cost.” In these states, bodies “are jammed, depowered, isolated...” While some legal rights exist for LGBTI people in Nepal, my participants rather express how much they are *not* protected, especially by the state and by the police.

As Dilts (2017) points out, when calling for justice to be delivered, many call for the same institutions that are “often themselves the sources of injustice.” Though some participants mentioned lobbying in the government with officials, few expressed any hope with politicians or the state – it has failed them. Rather, they work to create change in their own communities. In *Emergent Strategy*, Brown (2017) argues for alternative ways to address and interrupt harms that do not rely on the state, such as through transformative justice and community-based strategies. Participants in my study are doing just this – challenging oppressive institutions in creative ways on a grassroots level. Participant D says, “I advocate for the people...I speak for those friends of the community who cannot speak for themselves. I raise their voices...I have been working, speaking for the community.”

It is not the act crossing these heteronormative discursive and embodied borders that puts LGBTI people at risk; it is the borders *themselves*. Through interventions, interruptions, and disruptions, LGBTI people have found creative ways to challenge Nepali customs and counter oppressive discourses. Through their advocacy and language, they have found ways to empower themselves by creating spaces and forging identities. In a message of hope, Participant J says, “A

year or two ago, I would question myself and question why I walked around like this. But still my heart wouldn't agree. I wanted to walk [and live] like *this*. But now I see that it is not just me...[Now] we are not afraid of anything. We are human beings. We should also have the right to live like other human beings. There is that kind of enthusiasm.”

Future Research Needed

As little research exists on gender and sexual minorities in Nepal, much more research needs to be done. A history of LGBTI lives in Nepal would be very helpful; all of the literature I found only started with the beginning of the LGBTI movement in the 1990s. It is necessary to document Indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality in Nepal, especially as one of my Indigenous participants expressed concerns with linguistic hegemony and, consequentially, its erasure of Indigenous knowledges, histories, and languages. In addition, more research needs to be done on how contemporary (LGBTI) gender and sexual identities differ across the country and by language; my research was conducted primarily in central and southeastern Nepal, but the country is vast and holds many peoples and cultures. More research should also be done on younger generations; some of my younger participants mentioned how some of their friends identify as *queer*, *pansexual*, and more terms which go beyond the current ‘LGBTI’-only movement.

Glossary of Terms

Arko – other, as in other gender

Bahini – little sister

BDS – Blue Diamond Society

Bhaai – little brother

Daai – older brother

Didi – older sister

LGBTI – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex

Lingi – can mean gender and/or sexuality

Samalingi – directly translates to ‘same gender/sex,’ and is often used to mean ‘gay’

Tesro lingi – directly translates to ‘third gender/sex,’ but is often used as the ‘Other’ category
that extends beyond the gender binary

Wahaa – he/she (third person, singular, respectful)

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Interviews

Participant A. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 20 November 2018. Itahari, Nepal.

Participant B. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 19 November 2018. Birtamod, Nepal.

Participant C. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 16 November 2018. Lalitpur, Nepal.

Participant D. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 20 November 2018. Itahari, Nepal.

Participant E. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 20 November 2018. Itahari, Nepal.

Participant F. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 14 November 2018. Kathmandu, Nepal.

Participant H. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 19 November 2018. Damak, Nepal.

Participant J. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 19 November 2018. Birtamod, Nepal.

Participant K. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 20 November 2018. Itahari, Nepal.

Participant O. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 26 November 2018. Lalitpur, Nepal.

Participant R. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 20 November 2018. Itahari, Nepal.

Participant S. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 20 November 2018. Itahari, Nepal.

Participant T. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 19 November 2018. Birtamod, Nepal.

Participant V. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 4 October 2018. Kathmandu, Nepal.

Participant W. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 14 November 2018. Kathmandu, Nepal.

Participant X. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 17 November 2018. Kathmandu, Nepal.

Participant Z. Interviewed by: Patrick Sonnenberg. 19 November 2018. Birtamod, Nepal.