My Linguistic Autobiography
Dr. Christine Mallinson

I was born on September 8, 1978, in the small town of Salisbury, North Carolina. I consider myself a sociolinguist, and I've been fascinated by English, other languages, and the people who speak them for as long as I can remember. I was surrounded by different languages and dialects from the time I was born, and as a result I developed a love of spoken and written language. My mother says I was an extremely verbal child. I talked a lot, sang a lot, and learned to read at two years old. The first words I read out loud were "Thank you," on a big sign at the supermarket—not a bad first phrase to read, I guess!

My dad grew up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the heart of Amish country, and my family often traveled there to visit relatives. I remember being fascinated by the dialect, turning over their intonation patterns and pronunciations like "warsh" for "wash" in my mind's ear. I even picked up some useful local constructions like "The dog needs fed" and "You've got to be careful when you go out at night anymore." My mom also had a rural background, growing up in a small town in New York, near Connecticut. Eventually, she and my grandparents moved South, to North Carolina. My mom remembers coming to college in North Carolina, where she and my dad met. On her first day, she heard that the college was sponsoring a "Hey Day" on the first day of classes, meaning that each student was supposed to say "hey" to everyone they met. At first, my mom wondered why a college would sponsor a "hay" day, but she soon caught on to the linguistic traditions and culture of the South. She and my dad have lived there ever since.

Growing up, I only knew my grandparents on my mom's side, and they were part of my nuclear family. My grandparents were from Germany, and each of them spoke a different dialect of German. My grandfather used to say that he could never understand what anyone was saying when my grandmother and her family got together. At home, they spoke a mixture of English and German, and my brother and I both developed our familiarity with German by spending time with them. Some of my earliest childhood memories are of reciting German nursery rhymes, singing songs, counting to 100, and hearing terms of endearment from my grandmother.

Throughout my educational career—from daycare, to kindergarten, through high school—I was exposed to two other important varieties of English: the local variety of White Southern English, and the local variety of Southern African American English. From this point, my days were filled with the sounds of these dialects. I developed an accent that could never be considered "thick" but was unmistakably Southern, and while in high school I remember thinking to myself that, chances were, I probably could never get a job outside the South because of how I sounded. When I moved east to attend college at the University of North Carolina, I took classes on Southern regional identity, language, and culture, and decided to major in Sociology. I didn't abandon my love of studying languages, however, and I added a

minor in French and a second major in German. I was fortunate enough to have two study abroad experiences, a short-term program in France and a semester-long program in Freiburg, in southern Germany.

For graduate school, I attended a master's program in sociolinguistics at North Carolina State University, where I deepened my knowledge about language, culture, and education, particularly in South. I started to wonder about what linguistic and cultural diversity looked like in places that are stereotyped as being backwards and homogeneous largely because they are rural, and so I focused on Appalachia. For my master's research, I studied language and culture within a tiny multiracial community in western North Carolina, near the college town of Boone, and for my doctoral research, I did similar work in a larger Black Appalachian community located at the furthest tip of western North Carolina, near the city of Cherokee. In both of these places, residents had a love of language, a deep sense of community, and strong regional and ethnic identities that proved to be as compelling to write about as to experience as a visitor.

In 2006, I moved to Baltimore—a vibrant and quirky city that has been called the northernmost Southern town and the southernmost Northern town. The media plays a large role in portrayals of the city, from shows like *Homicide* and *The Wire* that reveal the complexities of life in urban centers, to films by John Waters that explore White urban culture with campy, often disturbing twists. While Baltimore's long history and many ethnic neighborhoods lend character and depth, it also faces many deep social inequalities. One of my goals has been to put my research on language and culture to work in Baltimore, where many youth are underserved in schools.

I live in Baltimore with my husband, Josh, whose Jewish background and West Coast upbringing gives him a linguistic and cultural background that differs from my own. He and I like to discuss the many differences in Jewish and Southern senses of humor, vocabulary, pronunciations, and idioms. We're also raising a daughter and son, now ages 5 and 3, who will grow up exposed to even more types of language and linguistic variation than I did as a child. The diverse school they currently attend is dual immersion with both Mandarin and Spanish used every day, and it is amazing to watch the processes of multilingual language learning unfold for each of them.

Across the U.S. and across the world, in schools and communities, children and adults like myself and my brother, my children, my parents, and my grandparents have multilingual, multidialectal, and multicultural stories to tell. I believe in the importance of guiding teachers at all levels, from preschool through higher education, to understand the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their students as well as their own. To that end, my friend and colleague Dr. Anne Charity Hudley and I wrote two books for educators on language variation—*Understanding English Language Variation in U.S. Schools* and *We Do Language*—that bring information about language and culture directly to teachers. In these books, we also share our linguistic autobiographies, and invite educators to reflect on their own.

I believe that linguists and educators can do our best work when we partner together. As linguists and educators learn how to welcome and incorporate every student's background and heritage, we will lift up our students, schools, communities—and ourselves. To me, it doesn't feel like a job; it feels like a critical mission as well as a great privilege. With these goals to look forward to and work toward, I suspect I'll never be bored.