# Feminist Research as Journey (or, Like, Whatever?)

*Esra Padgett*
*Hunter College*

The question of who *does* language change has existed in the field of linguistics for decades. When does linguistic change occur? Who chooses when a new word becomes relevant and how does this happen? This essay investigates these questions through a feminist lens, adapting tools from both feminist linguistic study as well as feminist rhetorical theory and historiography. Rather than pinning down an answer, the essay attempts to follow the trajectory of the research itself, observing how perspectives can shift drastically depending on one's method of inquiry. By using both primary archival material as well as contemporary case studies, the essay also investigates how a collaboration between current feminist approaches can bring a more holistic view to past, present, and future research.

From the valley girls of the 1980s and *Clueless,* to the Miley Cyrus *twerking* fiasco, American pop culture is no stranger to the speech of adolescent women. A look at last year's additions to the *Oxford Dictionaries Online* (*ODO*) makes this even clearer: *twerk, squee, vom, selfie, srsly, emoji, me time, fauxhawk,* and *pixie cut* are a few examples among many which clearly stem from the world of young girls ("Oxford"). The primary place this genre of speech has taken in pop culture is common knowledge and is certainly not new in my lifetime. But has this fascination, this influence, always existed? The words that have come into English recently this way seem so intrinsically modern it is hard to imagine an eighteenth- or even nineteenth- century equivalent. But after a discovery I made in the Hunter College Archives in the fall of 2013, I started to rethink this assumption. The following is a discussion of my journey through research, with an eye (and an ear) to linguistic innovations both past and present, and guided by what I call a "feminist lens." The gaze of this lens is indiscriminatory; that is, there are no restrictions on what can be looked at through it—where the gaze will fall—but the aperture is unique: capable of both local and panoramic views. My hope is that by implementing this feminist approach to research, we see an oscillation between the two angles of vision and begin to render the entire spectrum in focus.

## Step One: Discovery

The journey began unexpectedly, while I was perusing the editorials of a periodical, *The Normal College Echo,* published by female students at Hunter College between 1889 and 1915 (the college was single-sex during this time). The *Echo* also included writing from students at Hunter College High School, and I found in the high school editorial of an issue dated January 1914, a discussion of a "new term floating around the school": "crush" ("High School Editorial" 131). The way that it was being introduced positioned the term as though it was truly new to the students; the writer defined it for her audience as though they had never heard it before. I decided to inquire further and looked *crush* up in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). My findings confirmed my suspicion. Though *crush* has obviously been a word with other significance for a long time (as in, I just *crushed* my finger), the first usage of the term "to have a *crush* on someone," was in fact 1914, the same year the editorial was published ("Crush"). Nothing was written in the *OED* about where exactly the term originated, but the timing positioned the girls of Hunter College High School right at the frontlines of this small but lasting addition to the language. The discovery made me think. I had initially assumed the relative newness of teenagers as linguistic trendsetters, but had they always been leaders in linguistic innovation? If not in the overt and public arena of mass culture, have they instead had a covert hold on the level of colloquial, spoken language, one that over time has created genuine shifts and variation in language as a whole?

I was drawn to these questions by a feminist desire to empower women and other voices that have been historically silenced. Using a feminist approach to research was a method of retroactively returning them to positions of power. Before delving further into my own questions, I wanted to look over what I had previously read in some feminist historiographic texts. In the essay, "Opportunities for Feminist Research in the History of Rhetoric," Patricia Bizzell describes an approach to feminist research on rhetoric as, "[looking] in places not previously studied for work by women that would not traditionally have been thought of as rhetoric"(51). The stratum of language that I would like to investigate certainly fits this description as it resides in informal settings, is performed by untraditional speakers, and heard by untraditional audiences. Though the girls of *The Normal College Echo* were clearly cognizant that their language was entering the public sphere, as it was written for publication, the audience they expected was probably quite small and made up of peers. Similarly, when we look at examples from the present, even if knowledge of teenage language comes to the public through mainstream media, it is still only a representation, or parody, of speech that in reality occurs in the private sphere. Though Bizzell's feminist research is most often applied to archival research and historiography, it could also be applied to present-day situations. By looking at language change over time in these untraditional places, I wondered if it was possible to find not only a separate canon of women's rhetoric, but also an entire history of influence. This history would have to be as pervasive as it was evasive, both existing parallel to mass culture, as well as affecting it via moments of intersection. Could I find evidence to support this "girl behind the curtain" theory? If so, where and how would I find it?

Before making my own inquiry as outlined by Bizzell, I thought I should survey existing studies of linguistic change to see what was already out there. I decided to turn my focus first to linguistics, hoping that more hard-line language studies could help to support my claim. As it turns out, the theory that young women represent the vanguard of language change has been common to the field of sociolinguistics since the 1970s. William Labov first introduced the idea after his field study of linguistic variation in speakers living in Philadelphia and New York City (205). One of the major results of the study was that women were more often found to be leaders in linguistic innovation, along with lower-class groups in general. The results of his later studies added to this finding of the "gender paradox," which postulates that women use more conservative linguistic variables than men, while still leading the pack when it comes to the introduction of new nonstandard forms. For example, his 1990 study showed that women led the shift towards usage of [r] in the New York speech community, which previously featured the [r]-deletion we think of as characteristic of a Boston accent. At the same time, women used [in] instead of [ing] (as in feelin', doin', etc…) far less often than men, showing a conservative quality when it comes to preexisting "norms" (Matsumoto and Britain 129). Despite the paradox, the statistical outcome of his studies showed that change in general towards new linguistic variables was most often led by women and very rarely led by men. Though there are a lot of issues with Labov's work, which I will get back to later, the discovery of this body of work, as well as a preexisting discussion on the topic, supports my own "girl behind the curtain" theory, by suggesting a traceable history of female influence in language change.

Now let's get back to this year's *Oxford Dictionary* entries. It is important to note that there is a great difference between the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Oxford Dictionaries Online* though Oxford University Press runs both. The former marks a word's historical entry into the language, through written records. The latter is record of new words in the *spoken* language, which is not the same as "correct" or "Standard" English. Angus Stevenson, a director of the *ODO* says that words are added to the *ODO* when the Board of Directors has "gathered enough independent evidence from a range of sources to be confident that they have widespread currency in English" ("Oxford"). But what constitutes this "independent evidence"? What marks the switch from colloquial—and unaccounted for—language to "widespread currency?" Well, apparently Miley Cyrus' performance at MTV's Video Music Awards (VMAs).

Falling just three days before the *ODO*'s quarterly report of new entries, the performance caused a media frenzy, which led to the word *twerk* being added to the *ODO*, which in turn led to another fury of media backlash. The problem? As a member of the *Groupthink* blog pointed out: Miley Cyrus did not *twerk* alone. She *twerked* on a stage filled with black women who were essentially being treated as props (Battymamzelle). In fact, Miley hardly *twerked* at all—she appropriated a dance that existed long before she came into the picture, and her co-option was interpreted as invention. Her decisions in this performance are worthy of critique, attack, and discussion, and they have been put through all of that. But what I am interested in here is the leap that the media made, that mass culture made, that the *ODO* made, in declaring her performance the linchpin in the word's currency and inclusion in the language as a whole. This is where I realized the question that my research had not answered yet, or perhaps had not even asked: Where (and when and how) does language change actually occur? Who is responsible? And who gets to take credit?

## Step Two: Applying the Lens

I had begun to see how the gaze of the "mainstream" (and by this I am referring both to mass media as well as accepted academic studies) did not include the demographics I was looking at, and if it did, they were not portrayed as innovators. In regards to *twerking*, the question of who gets to take credit became obvious because it was so problematic: Miley Cyrus did not invent twerking. And yet, she was basking in every ounce of the debauched glory that had sprung forth from the media fountain that was the VMAs. What was especially odd was the fact that, even to a casual viewer, the fact should have been obvious. Of course Miley was not the first person to do this dance, and yet no one, at least in mainstream media, was asking who *had* been the first. No one was asking where *twerking* had actually come from. One feminist blog, *Crunk Feminist Collective,* addressed this issue by publishing a response that placed *twerking* back into the context from which it originated. *Twerking* has been an integral part of New Orleans bounce culture for decades, and the word itself has been known and used at least since the early 1990s (Crunktastic). Songs featuring the word were played on southern hip-hop radio stations throughout the 1990s, most notably with the hits "Do the Jubilee All," by DJ Jubilee, and DJ Jimi's "Where They At?". In addition, the form of the dance has roots going even further back, as it draws inspiration from African traditional dance, as well as dances of the African diaspora (Crunktastic). Twerking had not just appeared out of nowhere, it had grown out of a living culture and was passed around and learned by populations of people right here in the United States. Yet despite this long-running history, the word only gained currency the moment it was made palatable (well, palatable may not be the best description) by a young, rich, white girl. The media's treatment of Miley Cyrus as an innovator in both the world of music and of language was a blatant and racist omission of the people and culture where the innovation had actually occurred. On the other hand, however racially (as well as sexually) problematic the performance was, it probably was the first time the majority of television viewers had ever heard of or seen *twerking*. The debate stirred another question in me regarding the research I had done so far. How had factors such as race, class, and religion played into the group that was "leading" linguistic change? If the evidence pointed to women being at the forefront, then which women? Who were they exactly?

I needed to look further into the field of feminist research in order to answer these questions.

The studies I had seen had, perhaps intentionally, glossed over these other factors (which was some cause for alarm). The inquiry led me to the work of two linguistic anthropologists, Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, who had been participating in an ongoing debate with Labov and other sociolinguists on the topic of language and gender, and how research should be done around the subject. Often writing in tandem, their claim is that the sociolinguistic method of quantifying variables such as gender, race, and class produces "statistical generalizations" ("Think Practically" 470). Linguistic studies that rely on subjective variables treat these categories as static and do not allow for overlap and interaction between categories. Correlational studies, they said, also do not account for variance within categories, and in turn, often produce misogynistic, heterosexist, and racist results ("Think Practically" 481). Though I had wanted to say that women have always had control over language change, looking at the dialogue started by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet made me think that proving that point may not actually be a win for feminism. Instead, typifying "women's speech" may only result in a continued misogyny and ongoing ignorance of how the intersections of race, class, religion, and sexuality affect each speaker individually.

After looking at the work of Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, I began to see how a feminist approach could actually change the kind of information we are taking in as researchers. I concluded that two major adjustments needed to be made to my own research, as well as to linguistic studies in general. First, agency must be returned to the speaker by considering the speaker's active role in linguistic decisions, and second, the interaction between language and gender, or language and identity for that matter, must be looked at as reciprocal rather than one-directional ("Think Practically" 486). In "Think Practically and Look Locally: Language and Gender as Community-Based Practices," Eckert and McConnell-Ginet offer a method that includes these two adjustments, saying that "to understand precisely how language interacts with gender…requires that we look locally, closely observing linguistic and gender practices in the context of a particular community's social practices" (464). By looking at the interactions of members of a community, one is able to discern how qualities of gender, race and class play into a person's linguistic decisions, as well as how those decisions inform their role in that community. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet specify that a "community of practice," an idea adopted from anthropologists Lave and Wenger ("Putting" 28), is a group of people who "come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor" ("Think" 464). By placing characteristics within the context of a "community of practice," a more complete understanding can be made of an individual's social and linguistic decisions, one that often redefines previous gender-based assumptions by returning the speakers to positions of power.

Engagement in a community of practice is process-oriented. The discourse is ever evolving, and one's status within it depends on continued interaction. Though this learning process sounds complex, it is actually something we all do everyday: when we start a new job, join a club, get married, or even make new friends. Wenger has defined the community of practice by three essential dimensions: "mutual engagement," "joint negotiated enterprise," and "shared repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time" (Holmes and Meyerhoff 175). Mutual engagement depends on "regular interaction," while the negotiation in Wenger's second term refers to the process through which members contribute to the group's shared goal, in turn defining their own understanding of their role within the group (175). The "shared repertoire" is the meat of the linguistic research on community of practice. It is the specialized terminology members use as well as the "linguistic routines" they develop (176). The flexibility of this definition makes it applicable to an infinite count of communities, while at the same time the emphasis on interaction, process, and shared goals as markers of social and linguistic identity, differentiates this theory from pre-existing terms. The community of practice forges an indelible link between linguistic usage and social practice, reiterating the fact that the two cannot be treated as separate.

Adding the lens of community of practice did not negate many of my previous findings but rather brought them into focus, presenting a clearer picture of what was actually going on. Unlike Labov, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet offered a solution, by emphasizing the *why* and creating an investigation into it. They found that by looking into many actual communities, the conservative tendency mentioned in the Labov study was actually a social tool, consciously honed by female speakers. In many cases, women's usage of standard forms elevated their status by linking them to "educated" standards and defending them against gendered assumptions of stupidity or ignorance ("Think" 479). This perspective actually added to my previous research, as it provided a more thorough understanding of the link between gender and language by explaining the choices that speakers make.

Implementing community of practice research not only explains a speaker's decisions; however, it often illuminates a sphere of agency, which had never before been credited to them. An example given by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet that shows this is "politeness," a quality often linked to weakness or subordination and which has typically been associated with "women's language." They cite an ethnographic study done in a Mayan community in which women "in-marry" into families, where they are often abused by their husbands and mother-in-laws. The study found that these women honed their politeness skills in order to create ties with other women in the community that could aid their situation, as well as using it to navigate their daily life and avoid abuse. Here, agency is returned to speakers by arguing that politeness is socially strategic, creating bonds and alliances as well as "subverting institutionalized status advantages" ("Think" 479). Rather than a deficit, politeness is seen as a mode of parlaying power for women who lack any other resources to do so. The tendency to look at politeness as a weakness is a result of the historical acceptance of male-generated norms, ones that evaluate "women's language" as "other," or outside of the norm, instead of looking closely at speakers' usage (481). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet point out that simply by changing one's research method and looking at specific "communities of practice," revelations can emerge out of the smog of statistical generalizations.

After looking at this approach in action, I found that it paralleled perspectives posed by many other feminist researchers though outside of linguistic anthropology, in the field of feminist rhetorical theory and historiography. Bizzell outlines a theory created by Jacqueline Jones Royster, which echoes many of the concepts I had been looking at. Royster proposes a look into "communities of study" that avoids an "essentialized notion of identity" through the researcher claiming her own relationship to the work and by allowing for multiple understandings ("Feminist Methods" 120). She writes of the feminist researcher's need to "speak and interpret *with* the community, not just *for* the community, or *about* the community" (Royster qtd. in Bizzell, "Feminist Methods" 121). Here, Royster's "community of study" parallels Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's "community of practice," as both call for an approach that is grounded in the collective and allows for individual complexity. In both, a feminist perspective arises where no particular community or member of a community is viewed as normative, and the relationship of each individual to the community is distinct. Connecting the two theories had potential impact for both fields—modern linguistics as well as rhetorical and historiographic projects. My own journey had begun with the latter while doing archival research. So why not take the community of practice and apply it to the project of recovery?

### Step Three: Adjusting the Lens

Initially, I mentioned the indiscriminatory gaze that the feminist lens should have, in terms of what it chooses as its subject. Linking feminist linguistic studies with the feminist rhetorical studies mentioned above, led me to wonder: Could the method of community of practice research be applied to the past? Could it be used not just for presently existing communities but ones that had long since dispersed? Of course, it would depend on the kind of artifacts these groups had left behind; nonetheless the concept could be applied. Just as we group together social networks in contemporary statistical as well as ethnographic research, we group the past together. We organize our investigation of the past based on assumptions of who-fits-with-whom and who-belongs-to-what. Applying the community of practice model would allow us to hone in on groups in history, perhaps giving a more detailed picture of what occurred. Like the lens on a camera, the narrower the aperture I applied, the sharper the focus.

In order to put my hypothesis to the test, I decided to take a second look at my initial findings in the archives: the editorials of *The Normal College Echo*. Now, rather than following the guidance of feminist rhetorical theory, I would attempt to combine it with feminist linguistic practices, creating an interdisciplinary feminist approach to the research. Though my own time in the archives had been limited, I could see the potential of viewing the editorial staff of the *The Normal College Echo* as their own community of practice. The staff certainly fits Wenger's parameters for qualifying as a community of practice: The magazine was published monthly, which promised regular interaction and thus "mutual engagement;" they all worked towards the shared goal of publishing, with each individual occupying a different role in creating the finished product, a "joint negotiated enterprise;" and they delivered this all through their own language, a "shared repertoire" specialized in lexicon, tone, and thematic elements (Holmes and Meyerhoff 175). Though the staff of *The Normal College Echo* changed year to year, many of the women stayed for multiple terms, and even when the members changed, I found that a certain editorial voice remained consistent. This was reiterated by the fact that usually no author's name was given for the editorials, though there were sometimes two to three girls listed as holding an editorial position.

Treating the staff as a community of practice made one idea immediately apparent upon my return to the archives. These girls were not always representative of their peers. In fact, their editorials were often critiques of the social and linguistic behavior of other students at the college. Take for instance a high school edition editorial entry by Anna Fiebig from 1910, where she gives rhetorical advice to fellow students and criticizes their use of slang terms: "Girls, do not talk slang and above all do not confine yourselves to so narrow a topic of conversation. Surely you can find something to talk about besides the marks you deserve and did not get" (110). By recounting and then poking fun at the words she hears used by her classmates, Fiebig sets herself apart, linguistically and socially. Through her criticism, she builds a new social identity—an ideal Hunter College student—one that she herself serves as an example of. The identity being strived for is considered atypical, and the editorial creates this identity by purposefully separating the writer from her peers.

In the following issue, a very similar tone and opinion is given in the college editorial column. The author (we can assume *she*, as the entire magazine staff and student population was female) describes the meaning of *grind*, a colloquial term that seems to have since gone out of fashion (well at least I have not heard of it!). She writes:

> As a rule the true 'grind' is wholly self-centered, with a narrowness of mental outlook which is fatal to the best development of the intellectual powers. There is a total lack of sympathy with the aspirations and achievements of others and a contempt for those who endeavor to vary the monotony of study by legitimate relaxation and amusement. ("Editorial" 92)

While the last issue criticized students for hiding their intellect behind current slang, this issue criticizes those who are *too* concerned with academics. The reader must assume that the author(s) (named or nameless) occupy the space in between these judgments. Just as in the previous issue, the tone and subject matter sets the author apart from her peers, leading one to believe that *The Normal College Echo* editorials were less the "voice of the student body" than they were a "voice *within* the student body." Maybe the magazine as a whole was meant to serve the former purpose, but the latter emerges through the editorial columns. Seeing the staff as a community of practice allowed me to make this distinction. As I began to look at their work over time, I could see how a unique voice was developed and perpetuated. Changing my research method had indeed changed the information I was taking in, even though it was material I had looked at before.

Revisiting *The Normal College Echo* editorials as the product of a community of practice also offered a new rendering of my initial inquiry around the word *crush*. First, what was brought to light was the fact that these girls were not the ones who created the term (maybe that was already obvious) but also that they might not have even been the ones using it. Looking at the 1914 piece in which the word appeared, I saw the same-distanced tone was used again to describe and introduce the word. Once more, the editors positioned themselves as neutral observers, and while it is hinted that they experience *crushes* too, they also give advice on what a "sane" *crush* is versus the much-to-be-avoided "sickly sentimentality without the mentality" kind of *crush* ("*High School"* 136). They were in fact perpetuating the lexical addition but through observation rather than participation. This complicated my initial findings because while the column suggests that the coinage probably did occur amongst teen girls, these findings show that it was not common to all teen language, not even those within the same demographic or even the same student population.

Looking at *The Normal College Echo* staff as a community of practice contextualizes their language in a way that separates them from their peers. More importantly it reminded me of the agency inherent in all speakers—if these girls used the word *crush*, it was an intentional choice. Of course our knowledge of this is partially, if not completely, due to the fact that they have the advantage of historical record, and it does not imply that their peers were not also making conscious linguistic decisions. Though this treatment of *The Normal Echo* girls as a community of practice is incomplete, the brief glimpse of it through this lens immediately gave the subjects a depth I had not reached the first time around. The girls were neither entirely an exception to gender and social norms of the time nor were they leaders in linguistic trends, but rather opinionated observers. This brought up a new question in my mind: Once we gleaned something from community of practice research, what do we do with it? Where does the information lead? Where—backward or forward, up or down—do we go from here?

Since my application of community of practice theory to archival research was unprecedented, I decided to go back to the contemporary community of practice research instead, where I found that there were in fact modern precedents for the findings above. I wondered if these modern findings could be used in reverse chronology, backing up research on the past with evidence from the present. One study in particular reverberated with me. A 1999 study by Mary Bucholtz looks into a small "cohesive friendship group" of self-proclaimed female "nerds" at a California high school (203). By looking at how certain members enforce their "nerd identity" and how others react, Bucholtz infers how linguistic performance is aiding in the creation of identity for each girl. Like the girls of *The Normal College Echo*, the nerd girls choose to set themselves apart from their peers, but through their dismissal of norms, the existence of linguistic trends are further perpetuated.

In the Bucholtz study, many social and linguistic decisions are made by the nerd girls to separate them from what is considered normal at their high school. Some of the "linguistic identity practices" of nerds at Bay City High School include: Avoidance of current slang and non-standard syntactical forms; resistance to colloquial phonological processes (such as vowel reduction and contraction); employment of "superstandard" and "hypercorrect" phonological and syntactical forms; and use of lexical items from formal registers (Bucholtz 212). Thus, the members of the group remain "current" to their community of practice by avoiding trends that would make them sound current elsewhere. Though most of them refused to utter current slang words, they also chastised those in the group who did, upholding the power status of the words, not through usage, but through reaction to usage (219). In many ways, their avoidance helped to support the idea of certain words and linguistic styles as "normative" and others as not, by enforcing a consistent negative reaction to the normative styles within their own community of practice (219). These findings are very similar to what I had seen in the editorials. By critiquing their peers, *The Normal College Echo* girls had created their own identity, one aided by the distance they created between themselves and the rest of the student body. In the case of *The Normal College Echo* however, by publishing a record of the linguistic trends, the girls played a major part in perpetuating and preserving the new coinages they so despised. The initial questions returned: Whom *does* language change? Who is responsible? The girls who happily used the word *crush* or the girls whose critique of the word remained public record? Though the feminist approach had illuminated many of the realities of these communities, it had also complicated my findings even further.

I needed to look more into the theory aspect of feminist research in order to tackle these bigger questions. Returning to the existing discourse, I found a 2007 article by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, "Putting Communities of Practice in Their Place," in which they address my question and offer a solution for many of the issues practitioners have faced in the fifteen years since they introduced the term "community of practice." They write, "studies of communities of practice can only be productive if they are seen in the context of the social order more generally – if they offer links to social networks, institutions, and larger, and imagined, communities" ("Putting" 28). They suggest a double process of contextualization. First we look at trends and behaviors through the context of practice, and then we look at community of practice research through the context of the world at large (29). So, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet do not see community of practice as an end goal, but as one half of a symbiosis that could only be complete through the addition of work from other fields.

### Step Four: Panorama

Creating a link between feminist disciplines had already proved illuminating, but the exploration would not be done until I used the link to not only zoom in but also zoom out, finding a broader gaze. By using community of practice methodology in feminist historiographic study, I had gone from the macro to the micro. Now it was time to go the other direction. I needed to get back to the larger picture by seeing how feminist rhetorical theory would interpret the microcosmic illuminations of community of practice work. In a recent article by Gesa Kirsch and Jacqueline Jones Royster, on current standards in feminist rhetorical research, many of the needs newly outlined seem to be aptly answered by community of practice work. Discussing women subjects of research they write, "we need to make more visible the social circles within which they have functioned and continue to function as rhetorical agents and audiences" (660). This could easily be a description of the work done by community of practice researchers. They cite the need to "flesh out the contours of social spaces," a task entirely undertaken through looking at *practice*. When Kirsch and Royster say that we need to look at the "web of performances that manifest themselves, not just in traditional discourses but also in everyday activities," it is almost as if they are referring to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet directly (663). The respective gap that both scholarly duos have declared in their own research seems to be filled by the work of the other.

Combining the two provides researchers a better opportunity for more intricate findings. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet have stated that these conjunctions are necessary for future research, and that research methods and theoretical constructs need to be thought of as "complementary" rather than "competing" ("Putting" 29). In Kirsch and Royster's article, they define three dimensions of feminist rhetorical study. We discussed the third earlier, "social circulation," but the first two, "critical imagination" and "strategic contemplation," could also be applied within the framework of the community of practice (640). "Critical imagination" as defined by Kirsch and Royster, is the process in which we, as researchers, render our subjects meaningful (648). This is accomplished simply by the methodology of the community of practice, where qualifiers are explained by lived experience, and behaviors given depth through context. In feminist research practices, critical imagination is upheld by a consistent return to subjects rather than to our contemporary assumptions. Using the community of practice method thoroughly maintains this "tacking in" as Kirsch and Royster refer to it, as it is an investigation of subjects through their own actions and decisions rather than an analysis done by researchers after the fact. Even when applied historically, community of practice research eliminates the cold case feeling that recovery work tends to have, because it grounds all conclusions firmly in the lived actions of the subjects, operating as a sort of re-animator for lives that ended sometimes more than a century ago.

The next step, "strategic contemplation," seems to echo the work called for by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet. It is the reprieve we give to our analysis, to let it breathe—the time it takes us to see our research both up close and afar. This is where much community of practice research is lacking. After seeing a group under the microscope, we need to loosen our focus, thus the second step of the double contextualization mentioned above. Through "meditations" on the subject, we garner knowledge outside of our intended trajectory, giving up the driver's seat on our own research journey (Kirsch and Royster 659). The hope is to glean work that is "embodied, grounded in the communities from which it emanates" (Kirsch and Royster 659). For feminist rhetorical practices, this could be accomplished by applying the community of practice method to previously studied rhetors or groups of rhetors; for community of practice studies, this means linking individual community of practices to wider networks, both social and linguistic. For example, if we were to look at the women in the politeness study in isolation, their linguistic choices would not present anything significant, as the choices only become significant when they are seen in the context of practice. By the same token, the *OED* entries demonstrate the fact that a trend only becomes relevant when it permeates a multiplicity of domains: private/public, male/female, lower class/upper, and/or racial minority/majority.

My own inquiry had initially been weighted to highlight the qualities of the community of study with which I had a personal connection. The aim, initially, was to take the qualifier of gender and use it for empowerment. While that seems like a righteous effort, incorporating the idea of a community of practice actually presents a more holistic outlook, one that has the potential to empower multiple qualifiers, rather than singling out one. This distinction is necessary to point out for both feminist historiography and linguistics going forward, as I believe it is through interaction that possibilities are created and change can occur. By definition, intersectional feminism should be about the interaction of diverse groups and qualities, but often it is used to separate a group further from the "norm," adding category after category to distinguish an individual's experience. Though all the qualifiers of gender, race, class, and sexuality should be looked at, they are only truly valuable when seen in context, as within a community of practice.

So what does this all mean for *twerking*? The community of dancers and musicians who created the term *twerking* were certainly a community of practice in their own right. What would we learn from a deeper understanding of the word in its original context? Should that not be something we should know before adding it to our dictionary? Could this research render meaning back into the practices that had been omitted in the rewritten history of the cultural mainstream?

The answer is unclear. Even if we restored historic ownership to those whom it rightfully belonged, we could not take back Miley Cyrus' performance, or the fact that it was at that moment that most people caught on to the trend. Though sometimes regretfully, it is often through these domain-crossing events that culture shifts. Often it is only through our interpretation as onlookers that we have power to repair some of the damage done or at least lay something down to move forward. That is where the feminist approach comes in, and specifically when there is a conjunction between the disparate fields of feminist research, there is a possibility of serving one's research subjects rather than diminishing them. My own research journey had become far more about shifting my own perspective as an observer than finding a hard answer, but in turn, I had gotten a much closer, sharper image of my research subjects.

Ultimately, we don't get to have control over the direction culture will take, nor when (or where) change will occur. As is certainly the case with Miley Cyrus' *twerking*, we may often wish we could take back things that have happened, especially in cases of cultural appropriation. However, it is often through these very clashes and contradictions that leaps and culture shifts are made. It would not be possible or healthy to try to keep every domain separate, as people cross and join each other in practice, by engagement in a shared activity, whatever that may be. Though often painfully, these crossings can serve as motivation for innovation. Thus, Miley Cyrus *twerks* in private to a YouTube video of a 1990s *bounce* song and no one notices. But when she does it on stage, and culture responds, furiously, and anyone paying attention is reoriented by the discussion. Isolation, whether individual or collective, cultural or academic, can cultivate a new form, but *intersection* is where change is possible.

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